



Tasmanian College of the Arts
University of Tasmania

***The Suspension of Pictorial Equilibrium:
Materialising Mutability in the Medium of Paint***

By
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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Declaration

This thesis contains no material, which has been accepted, for a degree or diploma by the University or any other institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief, it incorporates no material previously published or written by another person except where due acknowledgement is made in the text.

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Abstract

Paint's fluid, plastic and viscous properties were used to renegotiate aspects of the painterly tradition in this studio-based research project. In the paintings that comprise the visual thesis, pictorial elements that are non-dualistic, non-linear and mutable give form to flux. Contemporary conditions of motility – or 'liquid modernity', as articulated by Zygmunt Bauman – are given expression through a reconsideration of precedents in Mannerism, Surrealism and Pop Art that were re-enacted in studio experiments to extend a lineage of eccentricity informed by Nobuo Tsuji's examination of select Edo period painters.

The works were executed in enamel, acrylic and oil on composite aluminium panels. Over three suites of paintings, a performative approach was taken. The studio experiments engaged with a range of artists' work, and with a body of contemporary literature about performativity and the agency of maker and material. In the paintings, this is manifest in the coalescence and dispersal of form. Improvisations with liquid paint reference works by Inka Essenhigh, Dale Frank, Jackson Pollock and Noël Skrzypczak. The physical transformation of form and spatio-temporal relations in the paintings was framed by Catherine Malabou's theory of plasticity. In the first and second suites of works, the lateral movement of fluid enamel paint on a non-absorbent horizontal substrate generated turbulent matrices. Through layering and abrading the surfaces, compressed, buckled pictorial spaces resulted. Improvised gestures were tensioned against

various modes of stylistic intervention and mannerist revision. A synthesis of opposing tendencies was accomplished; figuration and abstraction merge, fluidity gives way to viscosity.

The pictorial suspension of structure is a manifestation of Georges Bataille's ideas about the *informe* as not the opposite but the alteration of form. The mark of success for the paintings is their ability to sustain a lack of pictorial equilibrium. Ontological instability is depicted through the paintings' resistance to being read as fixed, and through the unfixed viewing position they seek to dictate. The ultimate ambition is that, in the gallery situation, they effect an arrhythmic attraction and repulsion, making the viewer the very subject of distortion and suspension.

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Dedication

To my two boys, Jeremy Parker and Felix Parker.

Table of Contents

Declaration.....	ii
Abstract.....	iv
Acknowledgements	vi
Dedication	vii
Table of Contents	viii
Table of Figures.....	x
Key Terms.....	xvi
Chapter One	1
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 Why I am Qualified to Interrogate this Problem	8
1.3 Experiments that Led into the Project: Oil and Water	15
1.4 The Format and the Substrate.....	20
1.5 Outline of Exegesis.....	23
Chapter Two.....	41
Fluidity and Plasticity.....	41
2.1 Introduction	41
2.2 Fluidity	43
2.3 Plasticity	80
2.4 Improvisation, Tampering, Interference.....	90
2.5 Eccentricity.....	97
2.6 Erasure	102
2.7 Plasticity and a Materiality of Colour	108
2.8 The Shimmer	113

Chapter Three	119
Viscosity and Mannerism	119
3.1 Introduction	119
3.2 Viscosity	122
3.3 Mannerism	145
3.4 <i>Mud and Jelly</i> and Base Materialism	151
3.5 Viscosity and Between-ness	155
3.6 The Lineage of Eccentricity	157
Conclusion	161
Appendix	166
List of Activities During Candidature	166
Bibliography	168

Table of Figures

Fig. 1. Andrea Mantegna, *Camera degli Sposi (Bridal Chamber)*, 1465-1474.
Fresco, commissioned by Ludovico III Gonzaga. Ducal Palace, Mantua.

Fig. 2. Megan Walch, *Syndrome*, 1996. Oil on canvas, 90 x 120 cm.
Collection of the artist.

Fig. 3. Megan Walch, *Alias 2: Remix*, 2013. Oil and acrylic on canvas,
182 x 182 cm. Parliament House Collection, Canberra.

Fig. 4. Megan Walch, *Vespa, Banglampu, Bangkok*, 2006. Oil, acrylic and glitter
on canvas, 132 x 115 cm. Private Collection, Australia.

Fig. 5. *Experiments in Suminagashi*, photograph, Megan Walch, 2012

Fig. 6. *Experiments in Suminagashi*, photograph, Megan Walch, 2012

Figs. 7-10. Megan Walch, *Studies: Mixing Viscous Acrylic Paint*, 2012-13.
Oil on board, 20 x 30 cm. Collection of the artist.

Fig. 11. *Experiments in painting on underside of custom-formed acrylic elliptical
dome, 120 x 90 cm*, photograph Megan Walch, 2014.

Fig. 12. *Experiments in painting on underside of custom-formed acrylic elliptical
dome, 120 x 90 cm, with strong directional light to create shadows*,
photograph Megan Walch, 2014.

Fig. 13. Piet Mondrian, *Grey Tree*, 1911. Oil on canvas, 78.5 x 107.5 cm.
Gemeentemuseum den Haag, The Hague.

Fig. 14. Jackson Pollock in his studio, photograph by Hans Namuth, 1950 in Katy Siegel, *Abstract Expressionism. Themes and Movements*, (London: Phaidon, 2011).

Fig. 15. Albrecht Dürer, *Draughtsman Drawing a Reclining Nude*, 1527, in Karl-Adolf Knappe, *Dürer: The Complete Engravings, Etchings and Woodcuts*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1965). Woodcut from Albrecht Dürer, *The Teaching of Measurements*, 1525.

Fig. 16. James Gleeson, *The Darkening Stage*, 1991. Oil on canvas, 160 x 213.2 cm. National Gallery of Victoria.

Fig. 17. Guo Xi, *Spring Morning*, 1072. Hanging scroll, ink and light colours on silk, 158.3 x 108.1 cm. Collection of the National Palace Museum, Taiwan.

Fig. 18. Dale Frank, *Twenty nine paintings were supposed to say something through their titles if not through their reason for being; twenty nine went onto the truck. Out of how many, seventy, well, forty six. Others could not be counted. But one was an actor, so there were really only twenty eight.*, 2009. Varnish on canvas, 200 x 260 cm. Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney.

Fig. 19. Helen Frankenthaler, *Pink Lady*, 1963. Acrylic on canvas, 214.6 x 147.3 cm. Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, New York.

Fig. 20. Stephen Bush, *Hackweed*, 2006. Oil and enamel paint on canvas, 183.4 x 183.2 cm. National Gallery of Victoria, Australia.

Fig. 21. Lara Merrett, *The ever changing nature of things Part 2*, 2013. Acrylic and ink on linen, 83 x 74 cm. Gallery Ecosse, New South Wales, Australia.

Fig. 22. Noël Skrzypczak, *Talking to Strangers*, 2011. Synthetic polymer paint, soap, glass and silicone installation, dimensions variable. Heidi Museum of Art, Victoria.

Fig. 23. Noël Skrzypczak, *In The Woods*, 2011. Acrylic on canvas, 91.5 x 76.5 cm. Neon Parc Gallery, Melbourne.

Fig. 24. Megan Walch, *The Spill Series (Skullbone 1)*, 2014. Oil and enamel on composite panel, 130 x 130 cm. Island Collection, Tasmania.

Fig. 25. Megan Walch, *The Spill Series (Skullbone 1)*, detail, 2014.

Fig. 26. Megan Walch, *The Spill Series (Skullbone 2)*, 2014. Oil and enamel on composite panel, 130 x 130 cm. Private Collection, Australia.

Fig. 27. Megan Walch, *The Spill Series (Skullbone 3)*, 2015. Oil and enamel on composite panel, 130 x 130 cm. Private Collection, Australia.

Fig. 28. Megan Walch, *The Spill Series (Skullbone 3)*, detail, 2015.

Fig. 29. Megan Walch, *The Spill Series (Satellitescape)*, 2015. Oil, enamel and glitter on composite panel, 150 x 150 cm. Private Collection, Australia.

Fig. 30. Megan Walch, *The Spill Series (Satellitescape)*, detail, 2015.

Fig. 31. Megan Walch, *The Spill Series, Failure*, 2015. Oil and enamel on composite panel, 150 x 150 cm.

Fig. 32. Megan Walch, *The Spill Series, Failure*, 2015. Oil and enamel on composite panel, 150 x 150 cm.

Fig. 33. Operation one: The pouring, spilling and casting of fluid enamel paint. Photograph Megan Walch.

Fig. 34. Sesshu Toyo, *Haboku Landscape*, detail, 1495. Ink, 149 x 33 cm. Tokyo National Museum.

Fig. 35. Lindy Lee, *Heaven Over Fire*, detail, 2014. Molten bronze, installation. Kochi-Muziris Biennale, Aspinwall House, Fort Kochi, India.

Fig. 36. Megan Walch, *The Spill Series (The Rough Guide 1)*, 2013-16. Oil and enamel on composite panel, 130 x 130 cm. Collection of the artist.

Fig. 37. Roy Lichtenstein, *Big Painting 6*, 1965. Oil and Magna on canvas, 235 x 330 cm. Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf.

Fig. 38. Megan Walch, *The Spill Series (The Rough Guide 2)*, 2013-16. Oil and enamel on composite panel, 130 x 130 cm. Collection of the artist.

Fig. 39. Megan Walch, *The Spill Series (The Rough Guide 3)*, 2014. Oil and enamel on composite panel, 130 x 130 cm. Collection of the artist.

Fig. 40. Megan Walch, *The Spill Series (Extreme Ikebana)*, 2014-15. Oil and enamel on composite panel, 130 x 130cm. Collection of the artist.

Fig. 41. Megan Walch, *The Spill Series (Tipping Point)*, 2015. Oil and enamel on composite panel, 130 x 130 cm. Collection of the artist.

Fig. 42. Megan Walch, *The Spill Series (Rough Guide)*, Failure, 2014. Oil and enamel on composite panel, 130 x 130 cm.

Fig. 43. Shozo Shimamoto, *Performance in China 4*, 2007. Acrylic on canvas, 205 x 140 cm. Image courtesy of De Buck Gallery

Fig. 44. Megan Walch, *The Spill Suite (Green and Orange versus Black)*, 2016. Oil and enamel on composite panel, 150 x 150 cm. Collection of the artist

Fig. 45. Megan Walch, *The Spill Series (Eschatalogue 2)*, 2016. Oil and enamel on composite panel, 150 x 150 cm. Collection of the artist.

Fig. 46. Megan Walch, *The Spill Series (Skullbone 3)*, 2014. Oil and enamel on composite panel 130 x 130 cm. Collection of the artist.

Fig. 47. Megan Walch, *The Spill Series (Satellitescape)*, detail, 2015.

Fig. 48. Megan Walch, *The Spill Series (Eschatalogue I)*, 2016. Oil, enamel and glitter on composite enamel, 150 x 150 cm. Artemisia Collection, Australia.

Fig. 49. Bridget Riley, *Hesitate*, 1964. Emulsion on board, 106.7 x 112.4 cm. Tate Gallery, London.

Fig. 50. Megan Walch, *The Spill Suite (Yellow versus Black)*, 2016. Oil and enamel on composite panel, 150 x 150 cm. Collection of the artist.

Fig. 51. Man Ray, *L'explosant fixe*, 1934. Gelatin silver print, 22.8 x 17.8 cm. Private collection, Paris.

Fig. 52. Caspar David Friedrich, *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, 1818. Oil on canvas, 98.4 x 74.8 cm. Kunsthalle Hamburg.

Fig. 53. Megan Walch, *The Spill Suite (Pink Fucks Black)*, 2016. Oil, enamel and glitter on composite panel, 150 x 150 cm. Collection of the artist.

Fig. 54. Jacopo Pontormo, *Deposition from the Cross*, 1525-28. Oil on panel, 313 x 192 cm. Santa Felicita church, Florence.

Fig. 55. Megan Walch, *The Spill Suite (Orange versus Black and Grey)*, 2016. Oil and enamel on composite panel, 150 x 150 cm. Collection of the artist.

Fig. 56. Megan Walch, *The Spill Suite (Green and Orange versus Black)*, 2016. Oil and enamel on composite panel, 150 x 150 cm. Collection of the artist.

Fig. 57. Roy Lichtenstein, *Yellow and Green Brushstrokes*, 1966. Oil and Magna on canvas, 213.4 x 457.2 cm. Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt.

Fig. 58. Megan Walch, *Extreme Ikebana*, detail, 2014. Oil and enamel on composite panel 130 x 130 cm. Private collection.

Fig. 59. Sue Williams, *Empathy Displacement/Loopy in Blue and Orange*, 1997. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 163 x 183 cm. Art Institute of Chicago.

Fig. 60. Inka Essenhigh, *Supergod*, 2001. Oil and enamel on canvas, 183 x 188 cm. Saatchi Gallery Collection.

Fig. 61. Inka Essenhigh, *Reconstruction*, 2000. Oil on canvas, 203.2 x 228.6 cm. Location unknown.

Fig. 62. Rosso Fiorentino, *Deposition from the Cross*, 1521. Oil on wood, 375 x 196 cm. Pinacoteca Comunale, Volterra, Italy.

Fig. 63. Installation view: *The Spill* at Contemporary Art Tasmania, September 2016. Photograph Megan Walch.

Fig. 64. Megan Walch, *The Spill Series (Eschatalogue I)*, 2016. Oil, enamel and glitter on composite panel 150 x 150 cm. Artemesia collection.

Fig. 65. Megan Walch. *The Spill Series (Eschatalogue I)*, detail, 2016. Oil, enamel and glitter on composite panel 150 x 150 cm.

Fig. 66. Megan Walch, *The Spill Series (Satellitescape)*, 2015. Oil, enamel and glitter on composite panel, 150 x 150 cm. Collection of the artist.

Fig. 67. Megan Walch, *The Spill Suite (Pink Fucks Black)*, detail, 2016. Oil, enamel and glitter on composite panel, 150 x 150 cm. Collection of the artist.

Fig. 68. Ryûsei Kishida, *Road Cut Through a Hill*, 1915. Oil on canvas, 53 x 56 cm. The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo.

Fig. 69. Ryûsei Kishida, *The Earth*, c. 1915. Ink on paper, 12.6 x 12.6 cm. The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo

Fig. 70. Soga Shohaku, *Immortals*, detail from right screen, c. 1760. Ink and colour on paper. Important Cultural Property. Agency for Cultural Affairs, Tokyo.

Fig. 71. Kano Sansetsu, *The Old Plum*, detail, 1646. Ink, colour, gold, and gold leaf on paper, 174.6 x 485.5 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Key Terms

Plasticity: *the quality of being plastic; specifically the ability to be easily moulded or to undergo a permanent change in shape.*¹

In this research, *plasticity* is taken to embrace contradiction, flexibility, instability and alteration. Plasticity is an operation of responding to form and, in turn, creating form.

Perspective: taken in all of its senses, to mean not just the pictorial rendition of objects on a flat plane, but also the understanding of the relative importance of things; a sense of proportion.

Eccentricity: *the quality of being abnormally centred; of not being concentric; of not having the axis in the centre. The quality or habit of deviating from what is usual or regular; irregularity, oddity, whimsicality.*²

In this project, *Eccentricity* is used to refer to esoteric, unconventional and heterodox practices.

Viscosity: *the quality or fact of being viscous; viscosity. In scientific use, the tendency of a liquid or gas to resist by internal friction the relative motion of its molecules and hence any change of shape.*³

¹ Oxford English Dictionary, "Plasticity, N.", accessed 19 January, 2017, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/145301?redirectedFrom=plasticity>.

² Oxford English Dictionary, "Eccentricity, N.", accessed 19 January, 2017, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/59249?redirectedFrom=eccentricity>.

³ Oxford English Dictionary, "Viscosity, N.", accessed 19 January, 2017, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/223901?redirectedFrom=viscosity>.

***Informe* (formless)** is a para-surrealist term, derived from Georges Bataille. The term denotes deformation, reformation, alteration and instability, and has become a cornerstone of theorising aspects of modernism through the writings of the theorists Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois.⁴ Bois and Krauss refer to ‘the Formless’ as ‘an operation’ or a quality of being ‘unverifiable’ and ‘non-hierarchised’ rather than as a concept. There are no fixed terms. The Formless is not simply a lack of form, it is alteration of form from within.⁵ Krauss states: “Instead, let us think of *informe* as what form itself creates, as logic acting logically to act against itself within itself, form producing a heterologic.”⁶

Foundation-fount: a term coined by author Francois Jullien in *The Great Image Has no Form, or On the Nonobject through Painting*; foundation and fount share an etymology: the French ‘fons’, which in turn is from the Latin ‘fundus’, meaning the bottom or lowest part, ground, and also source. This undifferentiated material is the origin of all possible figurations in Jullien’s translation of a traditional philosophy of Chinese painting.⁷ This etymology resonates with Georges Bataille’s theory of base materialism.

Base Materialism: developed during the late 1920s; the idea that base matter (the low) supports that which is ‘ideal’ or ‘elevated’ (the high). The

⁴ Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide* (New York; Cambridge, Mass.: Zone Books, 1997), 15-18, 108.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993), 167.

⁷ Francois Jullien, *The Great Image Has No Form, or on the Nonobject through Painting*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Chicago, Ill.; London: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

relationship between high and low is not a stable binary opposition, it is a relationship of instability.⁸

⁸ Benjamin Noys, "Georges Bataille's Base Materialism," *Cultural Values* Volume 2 Number 4 (1998): 499-515.

Chapter One

1.1 Introduction

This research project began with the general proposition that paint's fluid, plastic and viscous properties can materialise experience and identity in flux. Through acknowledging the diversity of the painterly tradition and exploiting paint's physical properties, I set out to demonstrate the medium's potential to reflect unstable social conditions and to materialise ontological instability. A theoretical departure point was the work of Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, and in particular his designation of 'liquid modernity'.⁹ Through the paint medium, my aim was to consider form, time and space as mutable. Through performative painterly operations, and through shifting pictorial syntax, I constructed painted spaces that are non-linear, a-temporal, and turbulent.

This tangible form of painterly re-presentation operates in 'productive friction' with the increasing immateriality of images. A motivating question for my enquiry was: what role can painting play in relation to the increasing mediation of expression; and is it more effective to embody an idea or to represent it?

In this research I used the medium of paint to describe inchoate form and spaces that are 'unfixed' and open to interpretation. The paintings developed from

⁹ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge, U.K.: Polity Press, 2000); *Liquid Life* (Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2005).

fluid, rhythmic and humanistic spaces to the violent flamboyance of congealed rubber from which humanism is increasingly expunged. The research contributes to the field of painting that operates between figuration and abstraction to materialise the instability of form and pictorial disequilibrium.

In *Liquid Modernity* and *Liquid Life*, Zygmunt Bauman describes the passage from ‘solid’ to ‘liquid’ as a form of modernity in which social forms and institutions change so rapidly that they can no longer serve as frames of reference for our actions and long term plans.¹⁰ We have to splice together a series of fragments, which requires individuals to be flexible and adaptable.¹¹ Bauman is highly critical of this ‘liquid’ condition, proposing that it represents a ‘consumerist syndrome’ of speed, excess and waste in which all forms should be pliable, all conditions temporary, all shapes amenable to reshaping.¹² Bauman proposes that that which is ‘sticky’ and ‘steadfast’ (both animate and inanimate) poses a threat to this liquid condition, and that the quality of ‘the slimy’ implies a resistance to a utopian value of free-flowing liquidity.¹³

My project engaged with and responded to this contemporary culture of flux using the material of paint. I associate current global conditions with the instability of perspective in all its senses. I engaged with the material to embody the centrality of fluidity and exchange to our increasingly mediated existence. I tested and suspended the mutability of paint as a method to generate ambiguous

¹⁰ Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*; *Liquid Life*.

¹¹ Bauman, *Liquid Life*, 2.

¹² Ibid., chapter 5.

¹³ Ibid., 3.

forms and spaces. I found that by increasing the viscosity of the paint, flow gave way to rubbery resistance. I asked the question: what are the implications of fixing fluidity in painting?

The project proceeded from the contention that painting has a current role to play in relation to digital images and the virtual domain. One of the motivating questions behind this research project was to ask: how can painting function relative to the increasing mediation of expression and immateriality of images? We have become used to looking at vast amounts of images from multiple sources, and, cognitively, we process them rapidly in order to cope with the visual information that we are presented with each day – and we tend not to move in relation to these images. In chapter three I address this question, and argue that the objecthood of the painted work provides an opportunity for resistance to disembodied and immaterial art forms.

I assert my position through a body of paintings that emphasise the base and viscous material properties of paint as well as resistance to flow. The paintings that comprise my visual thesis are the manifestations of the interplay between acts of filtering and direct sense experience. They assert a physical state in reference to the mediation of the world. This tangible form of image making operates in dialogue with the increasing immateriality of images. The research aligns tacit understanding gained from responding to materials with embodied forms of knowledge that work in resistance to pictorial conventions of representation, historical and contemporary.

I contextualise material and ontological instability in opposition to orthodox pictorial conventions through Georges Bataille's theory of base materialism and Jean-Paul Sartre's notion of viscosity and historical Mannerism.

Paint is a material from which unlimited configurations can be created. Inert blobs of unmixed colour can be manipulated to create the illusion of three-dimensional shapes: boats, trees or tower blocks.

*But paint is unctuous, sticky and messy. It can be smeared like grease or dripped like thickened cream. It conforms to the laws of gravity and movement. If I let fluid paint fall it naturally forms blobs and curves. When I position it vertically it drips. When I spill it on a horizontal surface it moves laterally to form a pool. It can be splashed, dripped, poured, smeared and daubed to become a register of movement and gesture.*¹⁴

Paint can be descriptive, illustrative and explicit – it can be abstract, inchoate, and visceral. I propose that this medium's protean physical properties extend its potential for re-presenting animating forces that no longer fit classical models of representation.

The history of western painting tells the story of the way Europeans chose to see and represent the world. Since the Age of Enlightenment, the control of matter has been seen as morally edifying. Matter was a resource to be harnessed, and European painting represented our separation from, and dominion over, matter. Representation was achieved by organising visual depictions of space with

¹⁴ Megan Walch, "The Rough Guide" (paper presented at the Tangible Means: Experiential Knowledge Through Materials conference, University of Southern Denmark, 2015), http://experientialknowledge.org.uk/proceedings_2015_files/EKSIG2015_Proceedings.pdf.

the use of pictorial devices such as linear perspective. Linear perspective was predicated on the geometrisation of space and on the differentiation of discrete objects. Humans evolved as being central to the co-ordinates of this constructed mode of illusion. Classical representational codes asserted the centrality of human subjectivity in relation to the world according to a Eurocentric perspective.

For Michel Foucault, the significance of Manet is that he transgressed the discursive attributes of classical painting with its emphasis on narrative.¹⁵ Foucault discusses the paintings of Manet as a plane in which power's workings were disclosed and challenged, and claims that by asserting painting's materiality, Manet exposed the workings of illusion in painting that had been hidden since the Quattrocento.¹⁶ Classical painting emphasised the representation of theatrical stories in three-dimensional space, whilst concealing the mechanisms that were used to simulate this reality; these paintings constructed a fixed viewing point, and therefore a stable viewing subject.¹⁷ Manet broke with tradition and heralded future developments in modernist painting by distracting the viewer from this fictive self-contained universe through doing away with the fixity of a single viewing point and collapsing classical representational codes.¹⁸ Foucault's ideas in the 1960s owed much to the renegade Surrealist Georges Bataille, who analysed the work of Manet as an anti-romantic, anti-humanist revolt against

¹⁵ Michel Foucault, *Manet and the Object of Painting* (Tate Publishing, 2009).

¹⁶ Ibid., 30.

¹⁷ Suzanne Verderber, Review, "Michel Foucault, *Manet and the Object of Painting*, Translated by Matthew Barr" (2015): 269.

¹⁸ Ibid.; Foucault, *The Object of Painting*.

outdated values of classicism.¹⁹ Suzanne Verderber discusses Foucault's analysis of Manet and his "refusal of humanist eloquence and sentimentality", suggesting that Manet opened painting onto otherness, to the deformation of form – 'the formless' – making Manet "a crucial figure at the threshold of a post-human future".²⁰ I focused on the material properties of paint to destabilise pictorial conventions including a single viewing position for the paintings. The works developed a futuristic quality as naturalistic and humanistic elements were increasingly expunged.

'The formless', translated from Georges Bataille's term *L'Informe*, is not a lack of form; it is a resistance to, and alteration of, form. Bataille defines the formless:

A dictionary begins when it no longer gives the meaning of words, but their tasks. Thus formless is not only an adjective having a given meaning, but a term that serves to bring things down in the world, generally requiring that each thing have its form. What it designates has no rights in any sense and gets itself squashed everywhere, like a spider or an earthworm. In fact, for academic men to be happy, the universe would have to take shape. All of philosophy has no other goal: it is a matter of giving a frock coat to what is, a mathematical frock coat. On the other hand, affirming that the universe resembles

¹⁹ Anne McConnell, "Art as Transgression: Georges Bataille's Lascaux Et La Naissance De L'art and Manet," *Equinoxes*, no. 3 (2004).

²⁰ Verderber, "The Object of Painting", 272.

*nothing and is only formless amounts to saying that the universe is something like a spider or spit.*²¹

L'Informe denotes deformation, reformation and alteration, and has become a cornerstone of theorising aspects of modernism through the writings of Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss. In *Formless: A User's Guide* (1997), Bois and Krauss pose alternatives to conventional classifications for thinking about Western art.²² They conceive of the '*informe*' as a series of tactical operations for 'unverifying' and toppling hierarchies.²³ There are synergies in the approach taken by a number of contemporary commentators. Melissa Gregg uses similar descriptors for notions of 'affect', and Brian Massumi proposes that "the life of the body and its lived experience cannot be understood without reference to abstract-real processual dimensions. These cannot be contained in Euclidean space and linear time."²⁴

In order to further the project of paint as a heterodox medium, I used its ooze and flux to assert the material agency of affect in a way that capitalises on the base material properties of the substance. Historical Surrealism embraced heterogeneity, as it opened itself to other cultures and forces that could not be contained by orthodox modes of representation; this included an interest in

²¹ Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess Selected Writings 1927–1939*, ed. Allan Soekly, trans. Carl R. Lovitta and Donald M. Leslie Translated by Allan Soekly, Jr., vol. 14, *Theory and History of Literature* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 31.

²² Bois and Krauss, *Formless*.

²³ *Ibid.*, 18.

²⁴ Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*, Post-Contemporary Interventions. (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002), 205.

esoteric practices and artefacts from non-European countries.²⁵ In this project Surrealism and a traditional Chinese pictorial philosophy translated by Sinologist Francois Jullien provides me with a counterpoint to the European logic of representation.

1.2 Why I am Qualified to Interrogate this Problem

I grew up in an outpost of the British Empire, the island of Tasmania. My formal education was based on an acceptance of Western cultural dominance and was reinforced through my exposure to European and North American painting. I learned to paint on canvas, a material that my forebears used to sail around the Pacific. I am constantly aware of canvas's relation to colonisation, the notion that materials are not innocent, and of Australia's geographical location in the Pacific Ocean.

I received my training in figurative painting as a young intern at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice. As a museum guard, I spent many days with paintings by Max Ernst and Jackson Pollock, and in studying the staccato animation of Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*. I was thrust into the heavens on a daily basis as I studied altarpieces and cupolas. The perpendicular orientation to the viewer, the '*sotto in su*'²⁶ perspective, of Mantegna's ceiling

²⁵ Here I draw upon the research of my supervisor, Dr Maria Kunda, in her doctoral thesis that re-evaluates the complexity of Surrealism's transgressive activity. Kunda asserts that the Surrealists' appetite for exotic forms was generated by an anti-western position. Maria Kunda, *The Politics of Imperfection: The Critical Legacy of Surrealist Anti-Colonialism* (2010).

²⁶ "Sotto in Su," means "from below to above". Encyclopædia Britannica, "Sotto in Su," accessed 19 January, 2017, <https://www.britannica.com/art/sotto-in-su>.

fresco in the Bridal Chamber at the Palazzo Ducale, Mantua (Fig. 1), was a revelation to me.

I continued my education in the United States of America on a Samstag Scholarship. Towards the end of my six-year tenure in this self-declared centre of the universe, my need to get a 'fix' from the only two curved streets in Manhattan, in the city's Chinatown, grew more regular. New York's utilitarian grid of advanced capitalism, designed for the flow of goods and services, had grown oppressive. Something significant was missing.



Fig. 1. Andrea Mantegna, *Camera degli Sposi (Bridal Chamber)*, 1465-1474.
Fresco, commissioned by Ludovico III Gonzaga. Ducal Palace, Mantua.

Over the following decades, I undertook studio residencies in Taiwan, Thailand and Tokyo, where I was immersed in different spatial and temporal apprehensions of the world that were reflected in stylised fluid lines, ether spaces,

and 'empty' spaces that were full. These pictorial spaces were configured without the use of linear perspective. I eventually returned to a Tasmania that had transformed its colonial heritage by acknowledging its original inhabitants and its geographical location; a Tasmania that straddles cultural fault lines.

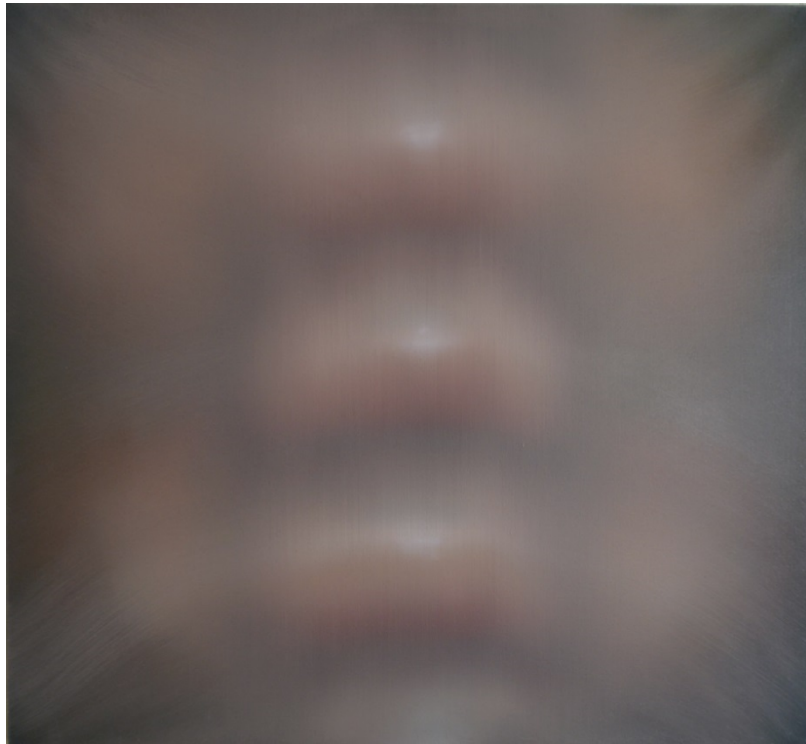


Fig. 2. Megan Walch, *Syndrome*, 1996.
Oil on canvas, 90 x 120 cm. Collection of the artist.

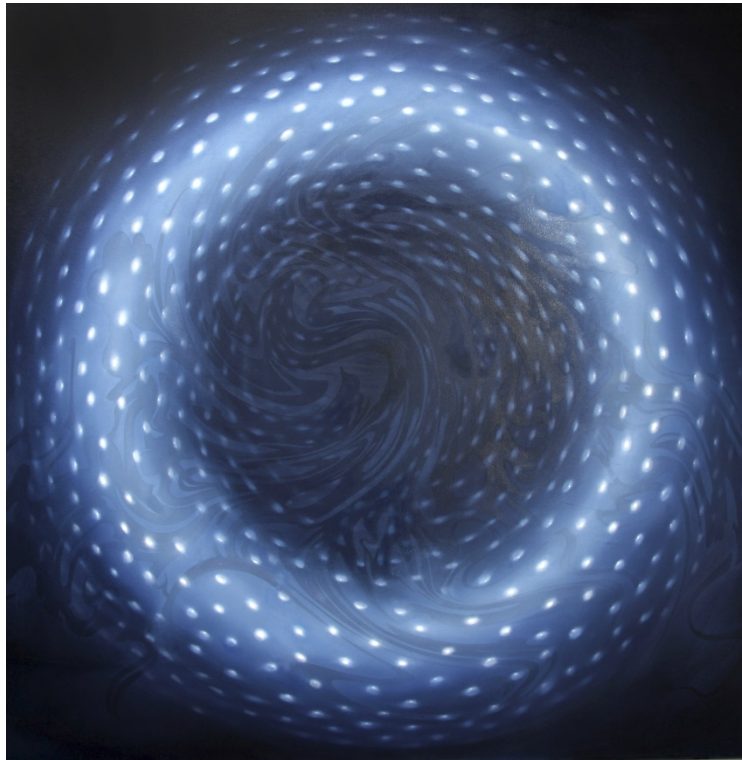


Fig. 3. Megan Walch, *Alias 2: Remix*, 2013.
Oil and acrylic on canvas, 182 x 182 cm. Parliament House Collection, Canberra.

The fluid, plastic and viscous properties of paint have compelled me to work with the medium and to manipulate abstracted elements in an illusionistic way. I have flouted perspectival conventions using pneumatic forms that swell beyond the picture plane. An oily, sticky viscosity, mimicking automotive duco or photographic sheen, pervaded my work as moments of mutation were frozen during movement from disintegration to reconfiguration and back again; recognisable forms morphed into abstract ones and vice versa. My preoccupation with mutable biomorphic forms manifested itself in an exotic, visceral Chinoiserie combined with a fascination for mutual East-West plundering. I have merged figures with grounds to advance and recede in an unstable balance – a dynamic interplay that never resolves. I have made unpopulated space appear full rather

than empty. I have rejected the use of rectilinear grids, linear perspective and horizon lines to divide and arrange space. My focus has been on the mutation of fluid and surreal forms to exploit the extremely plastic conditions of the medium.

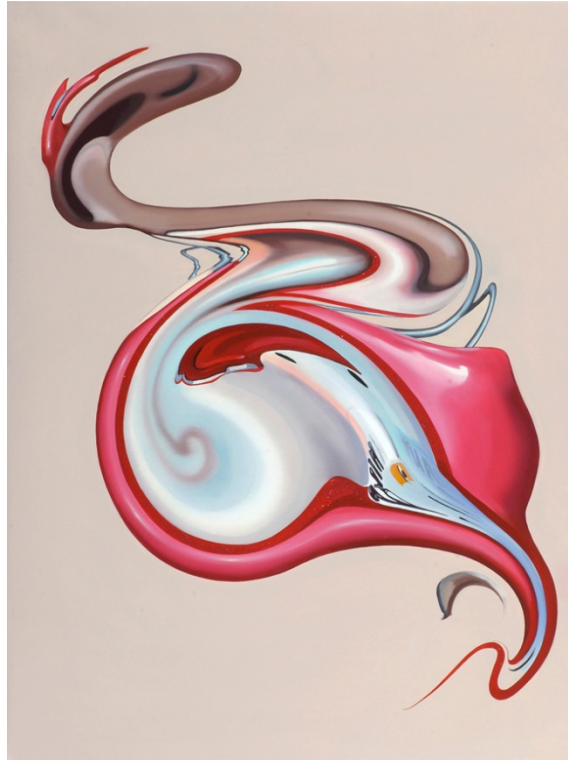


Fig. 4. Megan Walch, *Vespa, Banglampu, Bangkok*, 2006.
Oil, acrylic and glitter on canvas, 132 x 115 cm. Private Collection, Australia.

This painterly project reveals what it means to think in the medium of paint with a focus on its mutable properties. The research project synthesises breaches of pictorial convention to generate new forms and spaces in painting. It explores the complex materiality of paint in both form and content. I took up James Elkins' question: "What kinds of problems, and what kinds of meanings,

happen *in* the paint?”²⁷ Barbara Bolt, Estelle Barrett and James Elkins align thinking in the painted medium with the practice of alchemy: “Both the alchemist and the artist think through matter, by way of aesthetic/symbolic operations.”²⁸

“This is not a thinking process where one finds answers to questions, but rather where one contemplates and experiences situations, themes or feeling complexes (or ways of being).”²⁹ Alchemy was an embodied form of knowledge in which materials were considered to be active agents. The theoretical foundation of alchemy is the notion of the mutability of all matter.³⁰ When matter is given agency, a new idea of materialism can arise, echoing pre-modern forms of tacit knowledge in which subject-object relations are blurred through our intimate relationship with materials.

I orchestrated painterly events by taking the liquefaction of enamel paint to an extreme, thereby corrupting and destabilising its properties to generate fluid matrices upon which I would then improvise, using the interplay between my control and loss of control as the medium became an active agent and director of pictorial content. I continued to tamper with the resulting forms that emerged; I partially integrated emergent forms into the spaces, from which they coalesced to disrupt traditional figure-ground relationships. My operations of interference generated unstable vortices and surreal mannered forms. My manipulation of

²⁷ James Elkins, *What Painting Is: How to Think About Oil Painting, Using the Language of Alchemy* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 3.

²⁸ Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt, *Carnal Knowledge: Towards a 'New Materialism' through the Arts* (I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2013), 30.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Dedo von Kerssenbrock-Krosigk et al., *Art and Alchemy: The Mystery of Transformation* (Düsseldorf Germany: Museum Kunst Palast, 2014).

reflective surface properties contravened the establishment of a single viewing position for the paintings.

This exegesis is an account of the ideas that were generated from drilling down into the salient properties of the painted medium that have compelled me to work with this substance for decades. The fluid, plastic and viscous material properties of paint constitute the three main themes of the research and the chapters of the exegesis. Each chapter contains a description of the relevant paintings, an account of the methods used, the attendant themes in relation to the review of the literature, and an account of artworks that exist in the contextual field.

1.3 Experiments that Led into the Project: Oil and Water



Fig. 5. *Experiments in Suminagashi*, photograph, Megan Walch, 2012.



Fig. 6. *Experiments in Suminagashi*, photograph, Megan Walch, 2012.

I began by observing the interaction of ink, oil and water using a variant of the Japanese technique called *Suminagashi*, ‘floating ink’. This method of creating patterns on water with ink predates European marbling. I placed small drops of black ink and clear cooking oil into a static bowl of water with the tip of a wooden skewer. I observed repulsion between the oil and ink and the amalgamation of ink and water. I alternated drops of ink with oil to drive the ink into a series of concentric rings. I introduced turbulence by fanning air across the surface. This experiment led from the question: is it more effective to depict an idea or to embody it? Is it more effective to employ fluidity in the construction of paintings or to depict it?

I proceeded to mix acrylic paint on a palette and observe the material for clues. I selected photographs from which to paint small studies, using wet-into-wet oil painting technique. After doing these, I discovered that they were self-referential and that there was no representational problem that I was systematically testing. I was representing plasticity rather than employing it. I was holding fluidity and plasticity at arm’s length.



Figs. 7-10. Megan Walch, Studies: *Mixing Viscous Acrylic Paint*, 2012-13.
Oil on board, 20 x 30 cm. Collection of the artist.

I tested the fluidity of paint, and its capacity to generate form in the paintings, with the aim of expressing a broader vocabulary of paint.

In an essay accompanying the 2016 exhibition *Painting. More Painting*, the Director of International Art at the Art Gallery of New South Wales and co-curator Justin Paton writes: “You are building your image in real time from matter that slips and slides, and only by agreeing to be like the medium, to yield and respond, will the painting continue to grow.”³¹ Thinking in the medium of paint provided the foundation of this research project. Paint as a medium became a

³¹ Justin Paton, "Necessity and Glut: Notes on Painting.," in *Painting. More Painting*, ed. Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (2016), 19.

theme *and* was used as a method to construct paintings. This exegesis discusses the dynamic material performance of paint as an active modality of material thinking that works between skill and abandonment. “It is an auto-ethnographic account of the material performativity of paint and of the interplay between base materiality, chemical interactions and my improvised embodied action.”³² The interplay between the artist and the medium was active and contingent. The risk of failure and uncertainty was embedded in the working process: from the pouring of paint and the interplay between painted layers, to the interaction of fluid colour and the awkward compositions that resulted. This was raising the stakes for my painting; I was taking greater risks and attempting to avoid tasteful aesthetic choices.

The constant risk of failure lay at the heart of alchemical practice because the quest for the Philosopher's Stone was doomed from the outset.³³ *Materia prima* – first matter – was the inchoate substance required for alchemy. I considered the medium of paint to be *materia prima*, and metamorphosis occurred through the plasticity of the medium. In alchemy, solids must be liquefied before being congealed. I began the paintings by liquefying enamel paint by mixing it with solvent.

The Philosopher's Stone was said to be a common substance, found everywhere but unrecognised and unappreciated. The Stone was sought by alchemists for its supposed ability to transform base metals into precious ones.

³² {Walch, 2015 #193}

³³ Brian Cotnoir, *The Weiser Concise Guide to Alchemy*, ed. James Wasserman (Newburyport: Newburyport: Red Wheel Weiser, 2006).

The Philosopher's Stone was thought to prolong life, and to bring about spiritual revitalisation and the perfection of the human soul – “substance transformation was self transformation”.³⁴ “The central concept in alchemy was transmutation: the fundamental change of one thing into another, from a grosser, impure state to a more refined, balanced, and pure state. This was to be understood on multiple levels – physically, spiritually, and symbolically.”³⁵ The quest for the Stone encouraged alchemists (including Isaac Newton) to examine substances and their interactions in their laboratories; for the true alchemist, the process was more important than the goal.³⁶ This ancient tradition eventually became a discredited proto-science, but it had led to early developments in science, medicine and chemistry. It contributed knowledge related to ore testing and refining, metalworking, gunpowder production, ink, dyes, paints, cosmetics, leather tanning, ceramics, glassmaking, the preparation of extracts, and to distillation, as well as the periodic table.³⁷ In the practice of alchemy, there were four basic techniques: ‘purification’, ‘solution’, ‘coagulation’ and ‘combination’.³⁸

In his early book, *What Painting Is: How to Think About Oil Painting, Using the Language of Alchemy*, James Elkins stated that “paint is liquid thought”, he argued that “thinking in painting is thinking *as* paint”; he noted that

³⁴ Seegers Ulli, "Metabolic Processes," in *Art and Alchemy the Mystery of Transformation* (Dusseldorf: Museum Kunstpalast 2014).

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Cotnoir, *Guide to Alchemy*.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

very little has been written about this kind of investigation.³⁹ Towards the end of my project I emailed Elkins to ask whether he still believed studio-based PhDs in the visual arts to be antithetical to research. He replied with a link to a chapter, “Looking at an Oil Painting”, from an unpublished book, *Our Visual Worlds*, which addresses ways to discuss painting in a research culture. One of these ways is to focus on a discussion of materiality, beginning with Georges Bataille’s base materialism. Elkins’ current opinion is that discussions of materiality in painting are legitimate when they do not privilege materiality at the expensive of meaning.⁴⁰

1.4 The Format and the Substrate

Since 2003 I have experimented with an elliptical format (Figures 11 and 12) as the substrate for paintings with the aim of breaching pictorial conventions. The ellipse is an alternative to the landscape or portrait orientation of canvas. I increased the scale of the ellipse and discovered that this format imposed limitations on composition. The ellipse connoted the horizon due to its long horizontal axis; its form dominated the content of the images. The format of the square could be worked from four sides without one side being privileged over the other. I chose the square format for instability as one that was neither portrait nor landscape.

³⁹ Elkins, *What Painting Is*, 4-5.

⁴⁰ Email from James Elkins, 18 January 2016, 9:33 PM AEDT

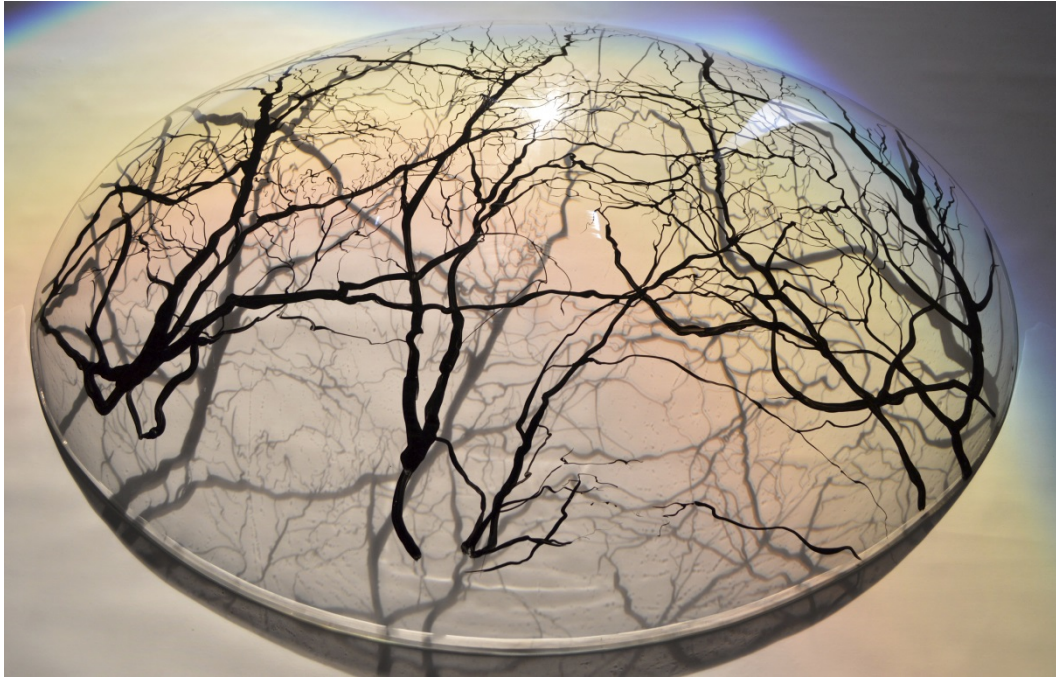


Fig. 11. *Experiments in painting on underside of custom-formed acrylic elliptical dome, 120 x 90 cm.* Photograph Megan Walch, 2014.

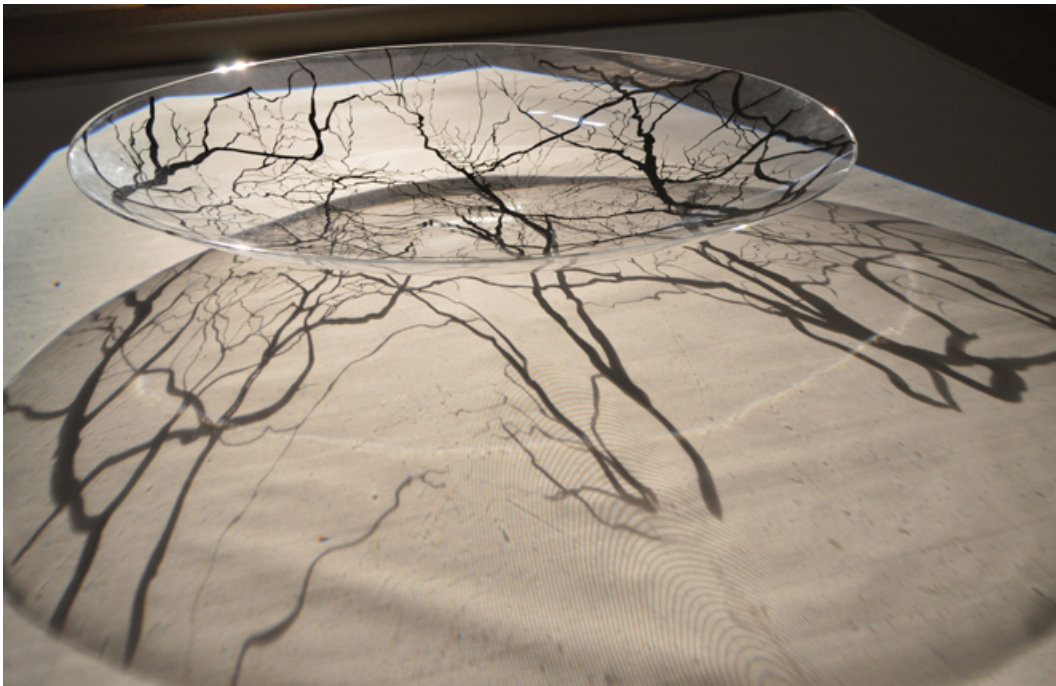


Fig. 12. *Experiments in painting on underside of custom-formed acrylic elliptical dome, 120 x 90 cm, with strong directional light to create shadows.* Photograph Megan Walch, 2014.

The fragile industrial substrate upon which the paintings were made was intrinsic to a sensibility of receptiveness and resilience. The ‘ground’ is the common term in painting for the background surface upon which we paint. The word ‘ground’ connotes earth and stability. I have chosen not to use this term because of the fragile, impervious nature of the substrate, and because there is no stable ground in these paintings. I question the notion of background in preference for a principle of equivalence or interpenetration between figure and ground, between negative space and positive space.

Composite panel is a contemporary sign writer’s material fabricated from a plastic core sandwiched between 0.5 mm aluminium sheets coated with high gloss plastic. I used composite panel for its ability to sustain multiple painterly languages: addition, subtraction, friction, washing, masking, rubbing, the pouring of fluid paint, the application of latex and glitter. The surface is a highly sensitive register of brushstroke and detail, and yet is resilient to pressure and erasure or to friction. It could be heavily abraded with an orbital sander, and easily scratched, dented and bent. Paint was held in tension on its surface; there was no absorption, and viscous paint took many days to dry, imitating the geological flow of lava. The enamel sat in tension on the surface of the panel like an abject rubber costume. There was no slackening of the substrate to contribute to the unwanted pooling of fluid paint. Its industrial plastic coating was seamless and reflective – a machine-made void. As the scale of the paintings increased, I rounded the edges of the panels in order to prevent their sharp edges from catching and burring; this

was a utilitarian decision. They became tableaux in which to stage theatrical characters. In several works I primed the substrate with black gesso in opposition to the tradition of white. The black absorbed the light to generate recessive void spaces, whereas the images that I primed in white advanced in space.

1.5 Outline of Exegesis

Chapter two of the exegesis is an account of how the unstable fluidity of enamel paint was tested as a means to generate ambiguous forms and spaces. Fluidity was the first operation in the syntax of procedures. Plasticity manifested itself in my improvisation with the medium: I directed the paint and it directed me. Plasticity occurred in the alteration of form generated by opposing but mutually configuring forces.

Fluidity, n. *Having the property of flowing; consisting of particles that move freely among themselves, so as to give way before the slightest pressure. (A general term including both gaseous and liquid substances.)*⁴¹

This research project proposes that linear perspective is no longer appropriate for depicting our interactions with the world. It is limited when it comes to responding to a perceived elasticity of spatio-temporal relations as a result of digital technologies that facilitate conditions of plurality and motility.

⁴¹ Oxford English Dictionary, "Fluidity, N.", accessed 19 January, 2017, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/72093?redirectedFrom=Fluidity>.

Wave-like matrices were used as an alternate way to articulate space, similar to Hubert Damisch's proposition that cloud forms were used as a motif and a dynamic pictorial principle in opposition to linear perspective.⁴² I propose that fluid properties in painting can destabilise and supplement gaps in pictorial conventions that are founded on Greek Classical models, which favoured harmony, objectivity, detachment and the isolation of forms to generate narrative.

I discovered a counterpoint to the Eurocentric philosophy of representation in Francois Jullien's translation of a Chinese philosophy of painting, "An Essay in De-ontology" (which privileges the expression of kinetic properties – to depict 'vectors of energy' instead of the mimetic illusion of objects).⁴³ The perception of the artist's relation to the world was echoed in non-dualistic subject-object relationships – matter possessed agency.⁴⁴ Jullien describes the inchoate source of all possible configurations in a tradition of Chinese painting using fluid and liquid descriptors. This source is named the 'foundational-fount', and it has correspondences with the formless.⁴⁵

The first key paintings that aligned with the project were the *The Spill Series (Skullbone Suite)*, which I describe with reference to Mondrian's use of trees and to Jullien's Chinese painting tradition; in both, the depiction of complex rhythmic forms in trees was used as a way of visualising intricate kinetic and

⁴² Hubert Damisch, *A Theory of /Cloud/: Toward a History of Painting*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press 2008).

⁴³ Jullien, *The Great Image*, 191.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 19.

interconnected forces.

Horizontality was my first operation in the syntax of generating a fluid horizontal order. The fluid matrices were created with the composite panel substrate positioned flat on the studio floor. I positioned the substrate on the floor to become a register of horizontality, which I use here in an expanded sense to connote lateral and plural conditions. In reference to the horizontal in opposition to the vertical, I discuss Leo Steinberg's 'flatbed picture plane' and the work of Jackson Pollock.⁴⁶ Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss include horizontality in Pollock's work in their description of 'the formless'. In addition to Bois and Krauss, Jane Bennett, Leo Steinberg and Hito Steyerl share a philosophy of horizontality in opposition to a philosophy of the vertical with its implications of hierarchy. While I explore horizontality in this project, the use of the horizon as a motif was inadmissible due to its representation as a boundary and its connotations of stability. Steyerl writes that the horizon played a key role in sailors getting their bearings at sea, and that it consequently played a pivotal role in navigation, trade, and colonial conquest.⁴⁷ Steyerl examines a politics of verticality and employs fluidity as a motif for contemporaneity in its multiple forms in her 2014 video work titled *Liquidity Inc.* She employs the motif of fluidity to draw parallels between conditions of unpredictability, as represented by

⁴⁶ Leo Steinberg, *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972); Katy Siegel, *Abstract Expressionism, Themes and Movements*. (London: Phaidon, 2011).

⁴⁷ Hito Steyerl, "In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective," *e-flux* 24 (2011), <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/in-free-fall-a-thought-experiment-on-vertical-perspective/>.

weather forecasts and financial trends.⁴⁸

In an examination of fluidity in contemporary painting, I refer to Helen Frankenthaler, Stephen Bush, Dale Frank, Noël Skrzypczak and Lara Merrett, each of whom harnesses the fluidity of paint in various ways to generate structure in their work. Once the fluid matrices were dry, I allowed them to guide my improvisation in the next painted layer. This required a responsiveness to form. I was guiding the paint and it was guiding me.

Fluidity accounts for the pouring of fluid enamel paint and solvent that I deployed as a method to spontaneously construct fluid matrices in the paintings. I corrupted the chemistry of enamel paint with solvent to lower its viscosity. I aligned the pouring and casting of fluid enamel paint and solvent with the Chinese practice of 'flung ink'. Paint had agency as a driver of pictorial form. The forecasting of fluid paint predicted the future of forms in these paintings; akin to the reading of tealeaves, or developing images from stains. This was like a form of folk knowledge gleaned from the intimate handling of materials. I align this operation with the practice of Surrealist automatism that was used to engage with the subconscious in the creation of spontaneous forms.

Tachisme and Art Informel share this rejection of the preconceived in painting.⁴⁹ In reference to Leonardo Da Vinci and his technique of searching for images in the chaos of stains on walls, Gombrich asserts the need for some

⁴⁸ Ana Teixeira Pinto, "Hito Steyerl's 'Left to Our Own Devices'," *art agenda* (2015), <http://www.art-agenda.com/reviews/hito-steyerl%E2%80%99s-%E2%80%9Cleft-to-our-own-devices%E2%80%9D/>.

⁴⁹ Steven Bell, *Tachisme* (Utah, USA: Brigham Young University. Department of Art., 1982).

structure; otherwise meaning breaks down.⁵⁰ I discuss two paintings that I considered to have failed when the syntax of my operations broke down, leading to confused and diluted visual outcomes.

I refer to the painting *Satellitescape*, in which the fluid grounds perform a chemical mimesis of turbulent weather systems and of other forms in nature like ice, sea and sky. I borrow historian of the Pacific Greg Denning's terminology of 're-presenting' in order to describe this performativity of liquid paint as a means of staging rather than depicting.⁵¹ The paint itself performs to mimic a macro-micro topography. The correspondence between the microcosm and the macrocosm is often associated with esoteric, eccentric and heterodox traditions.

I was no longer the sole author of the works. Orchestrating, conducting and collaborating with the contingency of fluid paint was a different process from prescriptive forms of image making. My improvisation demanded a balance of premeditated control and spontaneity. It required a heightened responsiveness and receptiveness to the material. It involved an increased risk of failure if fluid paint and improvisation resulted in homogeneous, awkward or chaotic compositions. I considered this haptic association with material as a driver of pictorial content, together with the embrace of irrational processes, to be a modification of Surrealist automatism that echoed forms of folk knowledge and esotericism. This new form of materialism was not, in fact, that new.

⁵⁰ E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Presentation*, 6th ed. (London: Folio Society, 2002), 76.

⁵¹ Greg Denning, *Performances* (Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 1996), 14.

Fluidity had the potential to create new forms in painting, or to become homogeneous and entropic. Dramaturgically, this project progressed from explorations of fluidity to stoppages, interruptions and resistance to flow.

Plasticity materialises in the protean nature of the painted medium. But the theory of plasticity is a discussion of form and its transformation. With plasticity, form is malleable, it retains shape but does not return to the original form. Plasticity resists deformation.

Plasticity n. 1. *The quality of being plastic; specifically the ability to be easily moulded or to undergo a permanent change in shape.*

2. *Biology. Adaptability of (part of) an organism to changes in its environment; specifically the ability to alter the neural connections of the brain as a result of experience, in the process of learning.*⁵²

Etymologically, plasticity connotes modelling and moulding; plasticity is the capacity to give form and to receive form.⁵³ A theory of plasticity has been cleared and theorised by the contemporary French philosopher Catherine Malabou.⁵⁴ Malabou's plasticity is the unity of acting and being acted upon, it is the creation of form and the dissolution of form.⁵⁵ Plasticity is the union of resistance and fluidity.⁵⁶ Plasticity embraces contradiction; it destroys dualistic definitions of past/future, inside/outside, foreground/background,

⁵² Oxford English Dictionary, "Plasticity, N."

⁵³ Catherine Malabou, *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality, and Dialectic* (London; New York: Routledge, 2005).

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

human/nonhuman, addition/erasure, and spontaneity/control. Plasticity holds extremes together, and they, in turn, act upon each other to become mutually configuring.⁵⁷ The interplay between opposing tendencies generates movement in the paintings towards becoming non-dualistic.

Binaries offer us little in the way of the nuanced meanings that exist between opposing terms. Georges Bataille's theory of the *informe* and base materialism acknowledged constant movement and exchange in the territory between opposites to address conditions of instability and non-duality.⁵⁸ '*L'Informe*' provided the foundation for Bois and Krauss's theory of 'the formless' that can offer a matrix for apprehending other kinds of form – including 'bad' form.⁵⁹ Plasticity shares correspondences with theories of 'affect', 'the formless' and a traditional philosophy of Chinese painting as translated by Francois Jullien.

Plasticity manifested in my paintings through the operations of improvisation, addition and erasure. Plasticity occurred by allowing liquid enamel grounds to direct how subsequent forms emerged. The nature of paint created the composition, and I then interfered with the emergent shapes in the fluid matrices to develop them further. By acknowledging relationships between pictorial languages of manipulation and spontaneity, I used the process of improvisation in painting to update the notion of automatism. Automatism was developed by the

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Noys, "Base Materialism", 499-517.

⁵⁹ Bois and Krauss, *Formless*.

Surrealists with the aim of accessing unconscious drives which could then be expressed through poetry, drawing and painting.⁶⁰ Automatism was a two-fold process of unconscious and conscious activity; the idea of having uncorrupted access to the unconscious was a flawed proposition.⁶¹ Improvising with the unpredictable qualities of the painted medium demanded a balance between control and lack of control, *and* a change in my perspective, my subjectivity.

I enabled paint's agency as a driver of pictorial content in this project. I responded to paint's direction and I interfered with the suggested forms. Barbara Bolt proposes that collaboration with the agency of materials constitutes an alternative subjectivity to one in which our mastery over material dominates.⁶² Bolt discusses a tacit engagement with substances that constitutes a vital form of knowledge production, and a shift in the centrality of our perspective.⁶³ Barbara Bolt and Estelle Barrett propose that in the arts and humanities there has been a shift from a distanced, impersonalised, scientific production of knowledge, to heterogeneous, fluid and lateral forms of understanding. When we collaborate with materials as active agents in painting, our experiential, interactive and performative acts initiate an embodied perspective.⁶⁴ They suggest that material thinking is experiencing a revival, and that this is configuring a world that is more

⁶⁰ Jacqueline Chenieux-Gendron, *Surrealism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).

⁶¹ Michael Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993).

⁶² Barbara Bolt, *Art Beyond Representation: The Performative Power of the Image* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004).

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 11-51.

⁶⁴ Barrett and Bolt, *Carnal Knowledge*, 63.

inclusive and less centred on human interests.⁶⁵ Bolt and Barrett name this ‘New Materialism’, and they propose that when matter is considered to be a force that acts upon us and influences our responses, then we interact with an alternative perspective in which different subject-object relations result in a de-centring of our subjectivity.⁶⁶ This alternative to anthropocentrism echoes the anthropomorphic belief systems of Paganism and Animism.

This was reaffirmed when I attended the conference *Tangible Means: Experiential Knowledge Through Materials* in Denmark in November 2015, which consisted of presentations by doctoral students from across Europe.⁶⁷ The overarching theme of conclusions from the conference was that students were working closely with materials to observe their innate physical characteristics in order to find unconventional and environmentally sustainable ways to manipulate and create new designs.

I refer to the influence of Surrealism on Jackson Pollock’s improvisation in the painting process and on his interest in the unconscious. Katy Siegel proposes that this aspect of Pollock’s work, in tandem with his ethnographic interests, contributed to the evolution of an alternative personal vision, or subjectivity, in American art.⁶⁸ In Japan, meanwhile, the painters Jiro Yoshihara

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Hosted by the Experiential Knowledge Special Interest Group at the University of Southern Denmark In November 2015, which I attended to present a paper titled "The Rough Guide".

⁶⁸ Siegel, *Abstract Expressionism*, 19.

and Shozo Shimamoto founded the Gutai group in 1954.⁶⁹ Gutai artists physically engaged with materials with a performative immediacy that did not prioritise the human body; it was a reciprocal relationship between the body and the painters' medium.⁷⁰ The Gutai group struck up transnational exchanges with Jackson Pollock and European Informel artists whose improvisatory methods were informed by the Surrealist doctrine of automatism.⁷¹

It was not enough for me to leave the fluid matrices in my paintings alone; I wanted to interfere with them. My tampering with suggested shapes led to the generation of stylised and mannered forms. The word 'mannerism' is derived from the Italian *manierismo*, which refers to the manner or way in which a painter develops their individual style.⁷² I discuss Mannerism as an embodied form of painting tethered to acts of resistance to pictorial convention in Chapter Three: Viscosity and Mannerism.

The operation of erasure, of undoing form, was pivotal to *The Spill Series (Skullbone Suite)* and *The Spill Series (The Rough Guide)*, in which my acts of erasure synthesised painterly layers to generate unanticipated forms and altered the spatial logic in the paintings. The dissolution of form embedded shapes into their surroundings. Erasure also registered as a violent expunging of form. The merging and emerging layers of paint revealed a history of the making, but there

⁶⁹ Ming Tiampo, *Gutai & Informel: Post-War Art in Japan and France, 1945-1965* (Northwestern University, 2003).

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Oxford English Dictionary, "Mannerism, N.", accessed 19 January, 2017, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/113575?redirectedFrom=mannerism>.

was no indication in what sequence layers had been constructed or destroyed, as the process had occurred in an irregular fashion. I refer to this non-linear sense of events in painting as temporal plasticity, and I discuss temporal plasticity, or atemporality in painting, with reference to the 2014 exhibition *Forever Now*, curated by Laura Hoptman at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Atemporality in painting is the ability of the medium to synthesise visual material from multiple eras simultaneously on a single surface.⁷³ Forms were conflated into a surface sheen in these paintings. Spatial relationships were compressed, creating tension between the textural, embodied properties of painting and their mediated materiality.

I describe the *Rough Guide Series*, in which forms are increasingly subject to compromise, strain, torsion, and ultimately disfigurement, to demonstrate how plasticity manifested itself in the paintings. In *The Rough Guide 1* and *2* a synthesis of shapes creates syncretic figures. I refer to the painting *Extreme Ikebana* in my manipulation of figure-ground relationships. Tensions between polarities generated constant movement in that work. Figuration and abstraction co-exist – shapes shift and share attributes to suggest the exchangeability or non-separation between objects.

In conclusion, I concur with Catherine Malabou, that plasticity is the capacity to give form and to receive form.⁷⁴ My improvisation in painting was a

⁷³ Laura J. Hoptman and Museum of Modern Art (New York N.Y.), *Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World* (2014).

⁷⁴ Malabou, "The Future of Hegel".

plastic operation. By responding to the unstable fluidity of the medium I altered my perception of paint and came to see it as an active agent. This was a shift in the centrality of my subjectivity; a shift from the centre is a de-centring – a form of eccentricity. This is a move beyond duality to states of otherness and in-betweenness. Unstable reciprocal relationships in painting share correspondences with Francois Jullien's tradition of Chinese painting, theories of 'affect', and operations of 'the formless'.

A discussion of colour in the paintings occurs at the end of this chapter. This project is primarily ocular, and these visual events have affect. In the project, colour progressed from being mixed and neutralised to becoming increasingly artificial, unmixed and industrial. The 'affect' of colour is a form of plasticity. I discuss a materiality of colour in relation to conditions of mixing, and the events that occur in the territory between edges. Using pigment suspended in a medium as a tool, I observed the migration of colour across permeable boundaries. Where there was a resistance to liquefaction, I saw a distinction between edges. The mixing of colour provided me with an analogue of the cross-cultural with its nuanced states of mixing and resistance to mixing.

I tampered with the suspension of enamel paint and solvent by adding silver. Immiscible silver particles in the paint registered turbulence of flow in the fluid matrices. I added highlights to forms that made them glisten, move and come to life. Patches of the industrial panel were left untouched and reflective. These effects of light and shimmer in the paintings catch the light, making it difficult to view the work as a whole from one position. The reflective surface properties in

the paintings disrupted the creation of a single coherent position for the viewer – the shimmer choreographing us to move in front of the paintings. The fragmentation of light sources generated instability in the viewing experience.

Anthropologist Howard Morphy's account of the use of cross-hatching to create 'shimmer' in paintings by the Yolngu people of north-eastern Arnhem Land pointed to 'the shimmer' as an autonomous formal and structural effect that transformed paintings and operated cross-culturally.⁷⁵ I examine my use of silver and highlight to generate movement and shimmer in the paintings. The shimmer is a signifier of the formless, and an exemplar of Jane Bennett's 'vibrant matter'.⁷⁶

My technique of painting wet-into-wet generated an oily, viscous emulsion that resembled the lustre of a photograph. Forms were conflated into a surface sheen in the paintings, spatial relationships were compressed, creating tension between textural embodied properties of paint and mediated materiality.

***Viscosity n.** The quality or fact of being viscous; viscosity. In scientific use, the tendency of a liquid or gas to resist by internal friction the relative motion of its molecules and hence any change of shape.*⁷⁷

The project progresses from an examination of fluidity to a resistance to it. In the final suite of paintings, my calligraphic gestures appear stylised and

⁷⁵ Howard Morphy, *Becoming Art: Exploring Cross-Cultural Categories* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2008).

⁷⁶ Bois and Krauss; Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

⁷⁷ Oxford English Dictionary, "Viscosity, N."

theatrical. The paintings assert a contaminated and flamboyant physical state whilst making reference to a mediation of gesture and immateriality.

Viscosity dictates how fluid enamel paint will flow, mix or repel. It is a measure of a fluid's resistance to flow. With high viscosity the difference of form is attenuated; it has definition. With low viscosity there is a progression towards liquefaction and homogeneity. Painted suspensions of high viscosity repel suspensions of low viscosity. Viscosity is the resistance to flow and a foreclosure on fluidity. In my project, viscosity connotes a resistance to mixing. I examine viscosity as a substance in between two states: solid and liquid. I refer to Jean-Paul Sartre's exploration of the ontological region of viscosity as one of ambiguity and lack of equilibrium.⁷⁸ Zygmunt Bauman discusses 'stickiness' as a threat to a fluid status quo.⁷⁹

Chapter three is a discussion of how the sticky properties of viscous paint assert the sensuous and base characteristics of the material. Painterly mediums are sticky, they are the viscous fluids in which pigments are suspended, and they can have a glutinous or gluey character. I discuss Georges Bataille's revolutionary theory of base materialism and heterology, and their concrete manifestation in the *informe*, with reference to the 2014 exhibition *Mud and Jelly* at the Museum of Modern Art in Tokyo.⁸⁰ This exhibition featured the paintings of Japanese artist

⁷⁸ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel Barnes (London: Routledge, 2003).

⁷⁹ Bauman, *Liquid Life; Liquid Modernity*.

⁸⁰ Bois and Krauss; Mika Kuraya, "Mud and Jelly," ed. The National Museum of Modern Art Tokyo (2014).

and historian Ryûsei Kishida, who coined the word *derori*. *Derori* is an onomatopoetic word that conjures up that which is vulgar, semi-liquid and sensuous.⁸¹ Ryûsei's project was to elevate base materials into art.

Medium, n, adj. *Painting. Any liquid substance (as oil, water, albumen, etc.) with which pigment is mixed for use in painting.*

Something which is intermediate between two degrees, amounts, qualities, or classes; a middle state.

*An intermediate agency, instrument, or channel; a means; esp. a means or channel of communication or expression.*⁸²

In my project, pigments were suspended in mediums, and movement was suspended in paintings. The paintings depict forms caught between states during a process of continual transformation. The process has been paused, suggesting potential for it to continue. Action was suspended at a point at which the outcome was unknown, to generate a sense of suspense. The paintings appear to mutate; the forms may have been fixed, but their readings were not. I consider some of the paintings to have failed when they remained static. This was a result of inconsistent operations of mixing, spilling, erasing and improvising. When there was a lack of reciprocal tension between form, composition and colour, there was a lack of movement and layers did not cohere.

⁸¹ Sandy Kita, *The Last Tosa: Iwasa Katsumochi Matabei, Bridge to Ukiyo-E* (University of Hawaii Press, 1999).

⁸² Oxford English Dictionary, "Medium, N. and Adj.", accessed 19 January, 2017, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/115772?redirectedFrom=medium>.

Accounting for the mannered forms that resulted from my improvisational work in the paintings, I focus on Mannerism as the assertion of eccentric stylistic tendencies and as a form of resistance to pictorial convention. Mannerism manifested itself in my paintings as a form of stylised theatricality in which painted forms became like costumed characters. As with the historical project of Mannerism, there is a sense of drama or heightened humanity. Mannerism was an anticlassical style and an aesthetic rebellion. Italian Mannerism, 1530–90, was characterised by a reaction to, and rejection of, the harmonious classical conventions and idealised naturalism of the High Renaissance that immediately preceded it.⁸³

I refer to the final paintings in *The Spill Series* in which I corrupted the viscosity of enamel paint to make it thick and fetishistic like rubber or plastic. The *Spills* became assertive characters animated across the pristine surface of the substrate. Un-mixed colours connoted the toxic and the industrial as I observed their viscous amalgamation and separation. I dripped blobs of latex to mask, and then reveal, sections of the substrate. These patches punctured the picture plane while staging a principle of equivalence in which negative space could become positive and then negative again. My calligraphic gestures appeared stylised and theatrical. The paintings assert an embodied physical state whilst making reference to a mediation of gesture; they stage the physicality of the body whilst making reference to immateriality – like the early paintings of Inka Essenhigh, in

⁸³ Walter F. Friedlaender, *Mannerism and Anti-Mannerism in Italian Painting* (New York: Schocken Books, 1965).

which her manga forms mutate into vivid enamel voids.

In conclusion, this project developed from an examination of fluidity into a resistance to flow. There was a performative improvisation between the material and me; a reciprocal interaction in which paint became an active agent capable of driving pictorial content. I was a collaborator and conductor, and this provided a shift in my subjectivity. I tampered with the viscosity of enamel paint suspended on a horizontal surface to generate volatile fluid matrices as an alternative to linear perspective. I blurred figure-ground distinctions and breached boundaries between figuration and abstraction. I manipulated reflective surface properties of the paintings to choreograph the viewer.

With high viscosity there was a degree of mixing, but form and colour were still attenuated. I used viscosity to emphasise the base characteristics of the medium. This was an entropic liquid territory in which forms were fixed, but they continued to visually transform. The paintings were successful when they appeared to remain unstable. The attenuation of form in the fluid matrices directed my painterly improvisations, and my responses were exaggerated, stylised and mannered. I use the word Mannerism to evoke 'the hand' as a form of embodied resistance to pictorial convention, both historically and in the confines of this project. The paintings assert a physical state whilst making reference to the mediation of gesture. They model the interplay between reason and sense experience.

Viscous, fluid and plastic properties privileged rhythmic, turbulent and kinetic properties of the painted medium. The paintings develop from states of

optimism and potential euphoria to the corruption of form through breaches and strains. Wave forms, matrices and vortices emerged to conjure up violence, instability and the threat of human obliteration. Fluidity had the potential to be utopian or ruinous. There was a fear of erasure accompanied by optimism at the potential for transformation as a result of collapse. The final paintings in the thesis congeal to appear greedy and truculent.

Barbara Bolt and Estelle Barrett talk about “art forms as models or modes of being. They are materialised metaphors of how we are in the world.”⁸⁴ If the way that we depict form and space in images is connected to how we behave in it, I propose that painting has a new role to play in productive friction with digital media: to materialise metaphors for flux and resistance in relation to the immaterial. Chapters two and three are an account of how I went about this.

⁸⁴ Barrett and Bolt, *Carnal Knowledge*.

Chapter Two

Fluidity and Plasticity

2.1 Introduction

This chapter begins with an account of my studio experimentation, which exploited the unpredictable fluidity of enamel paint applied to a horizontal substrate as a means to generate indeterminate forms and spaces. I account for a suite of paintings that form part of my visual thesis, and which were intended to portray mutability and instability. I also describe a number of works that failed to fulfil my intention but which were, nonetheless, important for the development of the thesis.

Early in the research project I undertook a four-day residency on a Tasmanian Land Conservancy property called Skullbone Plains in the Central Highlands of Tasmania, and there generated a series of paintings based on trees and sky. Here I offer an analysis of those works, which privilege rhythmic, turbulent and kinetic characteristics. I address them through a discussion of *fluidity* and *horizontality* as both thematics and procedures that I used in the studio. I describe and analyse operations of improvisation and erasure later in the chapter. Here I relate how I exploited the liquid potential of enamel on a horizontal plane, as a working-through of a repertoire of pictorial conventions that depart from, or contravene, the representational tradition of linear perspective. I describe my methods by referencing key texts that compare attitudes and

approaches to form in relation to various traditions and philosophies of painting. I focus on Georges Bataille's conceptions of the *informe* and base materialism with reference to Francois Jullien's concept of the 'foundation-fount' as they each refer to undifferentiated material as an unstable image matrix-in-flux that has the potential to create unlimited forms, both transcendent and base.

Georges Bataille's articulation of the *informe* was extensively elaborated in Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois's exhibition, and book-length catalogue of the same title, *Formless: A User's Guide*. For Krauss and Bois, horizontality is a key operation intended to lower form and language by referencing the body in resistance to vertical orientations and their attendant hierarchies.⁸⁵ Horizontality queers the pitch, undermining the vertical axis that maps the erect posture of the body and of visibility.⁸⁶ In select paintings by Jackson Pollock (1912-56) that were executed on the horizontal, lateral flows of base, scatological and heterogeneous materials were included. Pollock's works were improvised horizontally and viewed vertically. When placed vertically, the paintings continue to be a register of gravity and the horizontal in a subversion of traditional form. Bois and Krauss assert that these were acts of 'the formless'.⁸⁷

Throughout the course of this project I have aligned my thinking with Bois and Krauss, Leo Steinberg and Jane Bennett, whose contention is that horizontality connotes plural and lateral tendencies in opposition to the vertical.

⁸⁵ Bois and Krauss, *Formless*, 93.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 95.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

2.2 Fluidity

Fluidity is a general term that applies to my employment of spills and stains. I harnessed the fluidity of the painted medium with the intention of creating forms that were turbulent and rhythmic. These indeterminate forms resembled clouds and stains; they mimicked patterns in nature, mirroring a parallel relationship between macrocosm and microcosm. These wave matrices provided the structure upon which I improvised to develop the paintings.

In the studio, I poured liquefied enamel paint onto composite plastic and aluminium sign-writing panel, an impervious horizontal substrate, and this created wave-like matrices that generated folds in the spatial logic of the paintings. I employed the horizontal orientation of the substrate to harness fluidity and the relatively free spreading of paint. I tilted the panel to direct the flow. I physically wrestled with the large substrate. I worked on the panel from all four sides and in reverse, using a mirror. The discipline of the frame allowed the dynamic of the paint to suggest that it was out of control, exceeding the frame and in constant movement. The amount of time that I had to work with the paint was dictated by humidity, temperature and airflow; it had to be done in one extended session before the paint formed a skin. I wiped back areas of paint to reveal negative space and alter the composition. There was interplay between control and a lack of control; I was able to direct the way that the paint settled, but its ultimate configuration was not under my command. I was a conduit, a conductor and a manipulator of paint, and I needed to know when to leave it to do its own thing. This activity was orchestrated and performative. When dripped or poured, paint

spreads to form pools that level out. Edges of colour are held in tension; they obey gravity to mix and flow. I allowed colours to curdle and marble according to their miscibility and their viscosity. When dried and placed vertically, the congealed poured grounds continued to be a register of horizontality.

As a result of my four-day residency at Skullbone Plains, I intuitively gravitated towards an extremely gnarled branch of Hakea tree to use as a motif in paintings – here was as an observable and intricate object that I could use to articulate a heightened degree of movement.

Of course, tree and branch forms are central to Western iconography. In the chapter titled ‘Nature Perceived’ in *Mondrian: Nature to Abstraction*, Bridget Riley observes:

*From very early on there seems to have been a special attraction to trees and to the pictorial problem of how branches, sky and foliage or blossom interact and interpenetrate. Being essentially a subject that cannot be treated ‘realistically’, the tree offers a marvellous pretext for the fabrication of a rhythmic structure of shallow recessions and advances that have little or nothing to do with the void and solid of the original motif.*⁸⁸

⁸⁸ Bridget Riley et al., *Mondrian: Nature to Abstraction, from the Gemeentemuseum, the Hague* (London: Tate Gallery Publishing, 1997), 10.



Fig. 13. Piet Mondrian, *Grey Tree*, 1911.
Oil on canvas, 78.5 x 107.5 cm. Gemeentemuseum den Haag, The Hague.

A traditional Chinese pictorial philosophy translated by Francois Jullien points to a distinct difference in the description of subject–object relations compared with those that developed in Western culture through the isolation and depiction of objects. The depiction of trees provided the Chinese painter with an apprenticeship in imaging systems of energetic tensions and complementarity: the undulation and alternation of respiration, of bringing the outside inside and back again, with the aim of expressing ‘the foundational’, ‘the formless’.⁸⁹ My anthropomorphic tree branches suggest human limbs that interpenetrate the spaces

⁸⁹ Jullien, *The Great Image*, chapter 12.

that surround them and vice versa. They conjure a humanistic romanticism – or optimism about our ability to integrate with our surroundings.

Francois Jullien’s description of subject-object relations in his translation of a traditional Chinese pictorial philosophy resonates with Jane Bennett’s descriptions of ‘affect’, in which she uses Michel Serres’ language of physics to articulate the agency of unstable 'materialities' that evolve, coalesce, congeal and disintegrate from a turbulent field or void.⁹⁰ Her materialism is vibratory and leads to uncertain and non-linear multiplicities.⁹¹ In his examination of ‘the politics of vibration’, Professor Marcus Boon (writer and music journalist) proposes that when subject-object relations collapse, “what rises is a vibratory matrix.”⁹² Jane Bennett describes matter as vibratory, and considers non-human bodies to be active agents rather than dormant objects.⁹³ Bennett suggests that when differences are read horizontally, as associations, rather than vertically, as a hierarchy of things, that disparity is levelled, and that “to begin to *experience* the relationship between persons and other materialities more horizontally is to take a step toward a more ecological sensibility”.⁹⁴ Over the course of this project, I observed the sideways flows of fluid paint upon the horizontal substrate and the nuances that occurred when adjacent coloured mediums interpenetrated. I have come to see Bennett’s as an overtly spiritual take on horizontality, and my own

⁹⁰ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, xi.

⁹¹ Ibid., 5.

⁹² CTM 2015: “Between Love and Violence: The Politics of Vibration”. Lecture by Marcus Boon: <https://soundcloud.com/ctm-festival/ctm-2015-between-love-and-violence-the-politics-of-vibration-lecture-by-marcus-boon> (Accessed 30 September 2015)

⁹³ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 10.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

position is that, materially and compositionally, the horizontal axis connotes modalities that are rhythmic, heterogeneous and transversal. I harnessed the horizontal axis to generate a turbulent vibratory matrix from which emergent forms could then be improvised upon. This constituted a change in perspective from vertical easel painting. My experiments with horizontality extended Steinberg's lineage of the horizontal 'frame' as a dynamic performative arena in painting as practiced by Lynda Benglis, Dale Frank, Helen Frankenthaler and Jackson Pollock.

Jackson Pollock's immersion in his painting broke with a traditional point-of-view. His influences were broad. He associated his methods with those of the American Indian sand painters.⁹⁵ He regularly received bulletins from the Japanese avant-garde group, Gutai, a member of which was painter Kazuo Shiraga who turned his canvas from vertical to horizontal to make it into an arena as he physically wrestled with the paint.⁹⁶ The Gutai group assumed a horizontal transnational system of community as opposed to a hierarchical one.⁹⁷ Katy Siegel proposes that an alternative kind of subjectivity was affirmed by Pollock's interest in the Surrealist methods of automatism and in Jungian psychoanalysis.⁹⁸ Siegel writes "Pollock combined a belief in the concept of the unconscious with a self-image as an outsider, a Westerner."⁹⁹

⁹⁵ Siegel, *Abstract Expressionism*, 19.

⁹⁶ Ming Tiampo, *Gutai: Decentering Modernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Siegel, *Abstract Expressionism*, 19.

⁹⁹ Ibid.



Fig. 14. *Jackson Pollock in his studio*, photograph by Hans Namuth, 1950 in Katy Siegel, *Abstract Expressionism. Themes and Movements*, (London: Phaidon, 2011).

To capture the shifts in Western pictorial tradition that took place in the 1960s, Leo Steinberg uses the term ‘flatbed picture plane’, referring to the flatbed printing press, a horizontal bed that supports a printing surface and includes tabletops, charts and studio floors.¹⁰⁰ According to Steinberg, the flatbed picture plane broke with the tradition of paintings’ correspondence to verticality that had been in existence since the Renaissance.¹⁰¹ In describing the flatbed picture plane, Steinberg observed that it designates multiple perspectives: no single viewing point is defined as the right one, and the viewer was not required to be located in

¹⁰⁰ Steinberg, *Other Criteria*, 61-98.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

any specific position.¹⁰² The paintings in my visual thesis conform to that logic, and extend upon it, emphasising the destabilisation and interpenetration of forms and space.

I used matte, silver and high gloss surfaces to create reflections that destabilise a single viewing position; the reflective and sheen properties of the painterly surface undermine the convention of the viewer being located in a stable position in front of the work. This deliberate approach to material predates the notion of the flatbed, as we can see in Foucault's examination of Manet's paintings. Foucault draws on Georges Bataille's analysis to assert that Manet configured the viewer to be in a mobile relation with his paintings because there was no stable focal point for which the illusion in the work was created.¹⁰³

In the introduction to Foucault's *Manet and the Object of Painting*, Nicolas Bourriaud emphasises that by asserting materiality over illusion, Manet invented the modern viewer by making us aware of our own mobility and agency in completing a picture.¹⁰⁴ Similarly, viewers of my paintings are encouraged to dodge and move in front of them in order to negotiate their material aspects and to apprehend the works in their entirety. These refractive properties of light in the paintings keep us on our toes; we are not encouraged to relax, but to be mobile, to stay nervous.

While I explored horizontality in this project, I avoided using a horizon

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Foucault, *The Object of Painting*, 16.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 17.

line as a visual trope because of its compliance with orthodox perspective, its stability and its representation of a boundary. William Dunning points out that Steinberg failed to consider other pictorial vantage points and implications of the viewer in the Western pictorial canon. Dome and ceiling paintings are oriented perpendicularly to the viewer, who stands below and looks up.¹⁰⁵ Mantegna's ceiling painting in the Bridal Chamber in Mantua conforms to the conventions of perspective and spatial recession, but the viewer is below the painted vaults that configure an omniscient and celestial orientation. One of the limits of my project is that I did not extend my experimentation into these formal options, and that is an issue I take up in my conclusion. As Hito Steyerl observes:

*The use of the horizon to calculate position gave seafarers a sense of orientation, thus also enabling colonialism and the spread of a capitalist global market, but also became an important tool for the construction of the optical paradigms that came to define modernity, the most important paradigm being that of so-called linear perspective.*¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ William V. Dunning, *Changing Images of Pictorial Space: A History of Spatial Illusion in Painting*, 1st ed. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1991), 224.

¹⁰⁶ Steyerl, "In Free Fall".

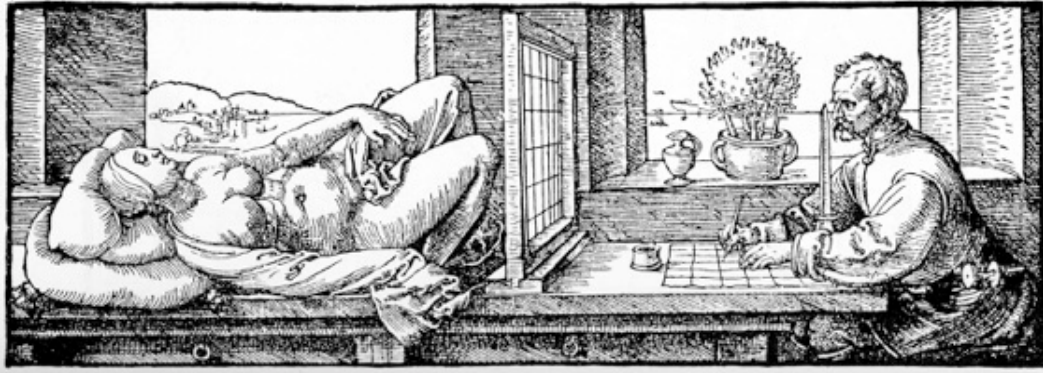


Fig. 15. Albrecht Dürer, *Draughtsman Drawing a Reclining Nude*, 1527, in Karl-Adolf Knappe, *Dürer: The Complete Engravings, Etchings and Woodcuts*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1965). Woodcut from Albrecht Dürer, *The Teaching of Measurements*, 1525.

My painting *Satellitescape* (Fig. 29) poses a contradiction that I considered with reference to Steyerl's examination of a 'politics of verticality' and perspective that perpetuate the older logic of linear perspective. She argues that omniscient views of the world are generated by the military, entertainment and information industries.¹⁰⁷ Like linear perspective, Steyerl alerts us to the way that 'Google Maps views' operate to give us a false sense of stability and sovereignty.¹⁰⁸ She suggests that satellite images also replicate the power relations that manifest themselves through linear perspective, arguing that aerial orientations establish the disembodied safety of surveillance, as the distanced observer floats over imaginary stable ground.¹⁰⁹ Steyerl's argument is compelling.

In Berlin in 2015, I saw Hito Steyerl's 2014 video work *Liquidity Inc.*¹¹⁰ *Liquidity Inc.* dissolves reality and speculation, theory and entertainment, social

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ KOW Gallery, Berlin, 17 September–5 December, 2015.

diagnostics and imagination.¹¹¹ Steyerl employs the motif of fluidity to draw parallels between unpredictable weather forecasts, human moods and financial trends.¹¹² She conflates weather prediction with the flows of money, desires and goods; further: “Water becomes a metaphor for an amorphous subjectivity swimming in the river of capital.”¹¹³ The written and verbal expression of Steyerl’s ideas is highly complex and fluid, but I feel that the imagery and text in her video works falls short of her essay writing, operating as a rather dry visual illustration of her theoretical narrative. The images embody neither her subject nor the sophistication of her thinking. Pictorially this may be a failure of medium, and my response to her video work galvanised my ambition to achieve a visual thesis.

The ability for a fluid painterly conflation of edges and forms to bring emotional affect reached a climax in Joseph Mallord William Turner’s paintings of turbulent sea, cloud, steam and snow. By contrast, *Liquidity Inc.* is constructed through a process of digital manipulation, resulting in the hyper-sharp edges characteristic of digital compositing and “green screen.” James Gleeson’s surreal, slippery, polymorphous forms, on the other hand, are menacing and potent; they coalesce and dissolve in unstable ether spaces. In the hands of Gleeson and Turner, paint’s edges merge, fray and blur, exceeding the threshold of clear delineation to give us a glimpse of other kinds of space and form.

¹¹¹ Pinto, "Hito Steyerl".

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Alexander Koch: Text accompanying exhibition of Hito Steyerl. “Left to Our Own Devices,” KOW Gallery, Berlin September 17 - December 5, 2015. Page 1.



Fig. 16. James Gleeson, *The Darkening Stage*, 1991.
Oil on canvas, 160 x 213.2 cm. National Gallery of Victoria.

From a Western viewpoint, undifferentiated form tends to be perceived as threatening, messy and uncomfortable. Francois Jullien writes that in the Chinese painting tradition it is latent with potential: “that which has no form is the origin of form and is the ‘generative fundament’ of all possible figurations in painting.”¹¹⁴ Jullien names this source of form the ‘foundation-fount’ and employs fluid and base descriptors: ‘fount’ means a reservoir for liquids, and the ‘foundational’ is paired with words like ‘upstream’, ‘resorb’, ‘irrigate’, and ‘flow’.¹¹⁵ Jullien uses the words ‘limpidity’ and ‘upstream’ to refer to the Chinese

¹¹⁴ Jullien, *The Great Image*, xii. translator's note.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 121-39.

painter accessing the mass of indistinct material and energy before it coalesces into discrete and identifiable forms.¹¹⁶ Jullien's translation of a traditional Chinese operation in painting is a return to the source of form to paint the process as it emerges and recedes from its source.¹¹⁷ The undifferentiated source of form was viewed as neither chaotic nor formless, and so here we confront a possible cultural divide.

Jullien asserts that in China, movement and energy were conceptualised, rather than the realistic representation of nature.¹¹⁸ According to Jullien, the split between matter and spirit, subject and object, presence and absence, was never developed by the Chinese; rather, emptiness and 'de-saturation' were spiritualised.¹¹⁹ The apprehension of activity dominated aesthetic perception, and reality was conceived only in its constant mutation; the traditional Chinese painter depicted 'vectors of energy'.¹²⁰

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 121-39.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 180.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 181.



Fig. 17. Guo Xi, *Spring Morning*, 1072.
Hanging scroll, ink and light colours on silk, 158.3 x 108.1 cm.
Collection of the National Palace Museum, Taiwan.

Francois Jullien's descriptions of the turbulence and agency of inchoate matter resonate with the ebb and flow of intensities that are the descriptors of a theory of 'affect'. Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg introduce us to this theory by saying that "affect emerges out of muddy, unmediated relatedness and not in some dialectical reconciliation of cleanly oppositional elements or primary unity, it makes easy compartmentalisation give way to thresholds and tensions, blends and blurs."¹²¹ The latter are descriptors of some of the operational processes that I used to manipulate paint in the visual thesis.

¹²¹ Sara Ahmed, "Happy Objects," in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2010), 4.

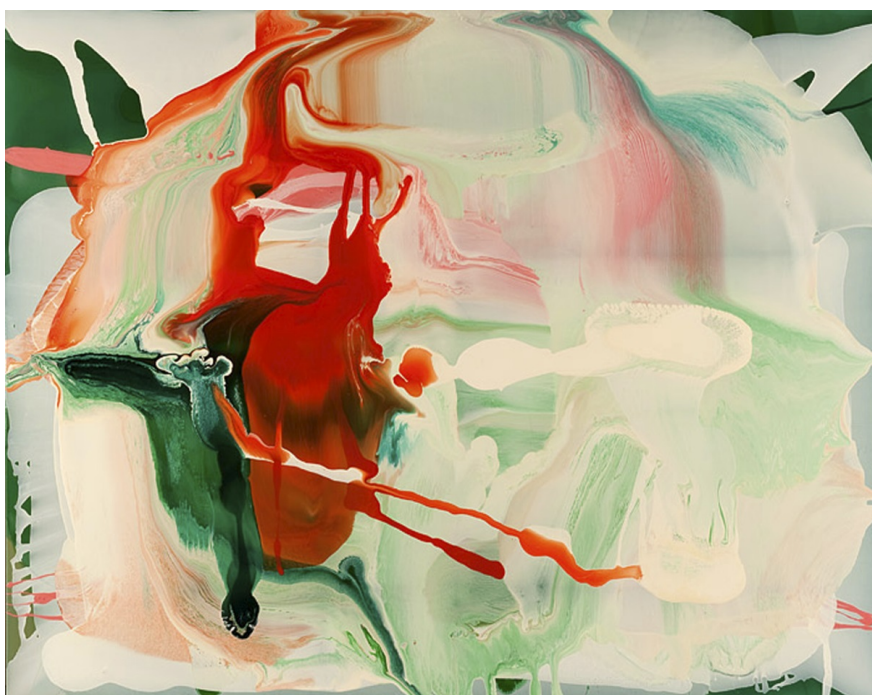


Fig. 18. Dale Frank, *Twenty nine paintings were supposed to say something through their titles if not through their reason for being; twenty nine went onto the truck. Out of how many, seventy, well, forty-six. Others could not be counted. But one was an actor, so there were really only twenty eight.*, 2009. Varnish on canvas, 200 x 260 cm. Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney.



Fig. 19. Helen Frankenthaler, *Pink Lady*, 1963. Acrylic on canvas, 214.6 x 147.3 cm. Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, New York.

American painter Helen Frankenthaler is the godmother of pouring and staining canvas with aqueous painterly veils of colour and space. Australian painters Dale Frank, Stephen Bush, Noël Skrzypczak and Lara Merrett use fluid paint to generate forms. Lara Merrett's transparent veils of fluid colour have a whimsical, romantic overtone, whereas the paintings I have developed in the course of my research project became increasingly dystopian and less aesthetically appealing. Dale Frank flirts with control and loss of control over his materials and explores the sensuality of colour in his paintings:

*Frank inverts the conventional process of painting. Combining varnish and pigment, these paintings document the traces of Frank's actions: the mixing, movement and layering of the painting process. Thick and viscous, the medium continues to work, to 'act' long after the artist decides to stop directing it himself ... these works are the evidence of the tension between chance and control.*¹²²

¹²² Press Release, Dale Frank Exhibition "Frankreich Romani", 03 Feb-12 Mar 2011, Anna Schwartz Gallery. <https://ocula.com/art-exhibitions/anna-schwartz/frankreich-romani/> (Accessed 16 September 2016)



Fig. 20. Stephen Bush, *Hackweed*, 2006.
Oil and enamel paint on canvas, 183.4 x 183.2 cm.
National Gallery of Victoria, Australia.

Stephen Bush's fluid 'scapes' become warped stage sets for the actions of his characters. He generates vibrant marbled tableaux. These fluid settings are constructed in a similar way to mine, and his figures are engaged in some sort of confounded narrative, but my forms are more elusive, indeterminate and rhythmic. Noël Skrzypczak also flirts with chance and control. Her style of painterly abstraction draws from a vocabulary of Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism; her paintings are a mix of spontaneous gesture and improvisation. She creates organic forms by interacting with painterly material. Skrzypczak's shapes are eccentric, amorphous and ambiguous. Her concerns are closely aligned with my own as her improvisation generates new kinds of forms that teeter between abstraction and figuration. They do not conform to aesthetics of pure

fluid abstraction, they anthropomorphise into molten beasts that straddle categories of form to create new content.



Fig. 21. Lara Merrett, *The ever-changing nature of things Part 2*, 2013.
Acrylic and ink on linen, 83 x 74 cm. Gallery Ecosse, New South Wales, Australia.

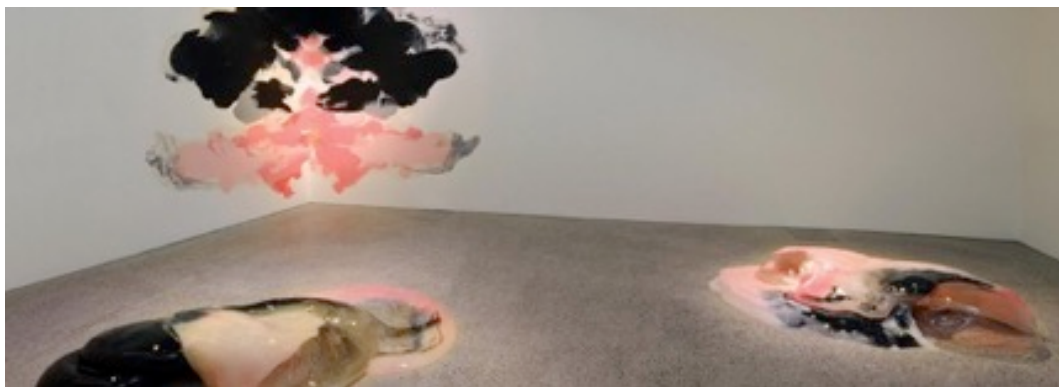


Fig. 22. Noël Skrzypczak, *Talking to Strangers*, 2011.
Synthetic polymer paint, soap, glass and silicone, installation, dimensions variable.
Heidi Museum of Art, Victoria.



Fig. 23. Noël Skrzypczak, *In The Woods*, 2011.
Acrylic on canvas, 91.5 x 76.5 cm. Neon Parc Gallery, Melbourne.

I have used variations on similar processes to these artists to create emergent painterly fields in my paintings. While this method has become increasingly common in recent painting practice, I have extended, fragmented, eroded and perforated aqueous matrices to generate spaces of otherness: heterotopias.

During my residency at Skullbone Plains, I was struck by the potential to work between abstraction and figuration when observing the micro-macro worlds of the landscape, and by the possibilities of articulating a folded spatial matrix using branch formations. I adopted the branch motif for its ability to transform pictorial space by expressing movement and tension.



Fig. 24. Megan Walch, *The Spill Series (Skullbone 1)*, 2014.
Oil and enamel on composite panel, 130 x 130 cm. Island Collection, Tasmania.

In *The Spill Series (Skullbone 1, 2 and 3)* (Figs. 24, 26 and 27) limbs of gnarled bark and polyp pulse against vapour. Branch becomes bone becomes branch again. Solid form is perforated like lace through which the deeper spatial matrix is visible. Fluid enamel marbles then turns gaseous. Tufts of cloud connote high altitude winds. Emphasis is placed on the diagonal, transitional movements and the rhythmic undulation of forms. *The Skullbone Suite* emphasises a sense of the transitional. Limb and bone convulse in ozone or aqueous violence. The paintings are tinged with naturalism, a nostalgic humanism. There is a glimmer of hope for transcendence arising through destruction. The potential for ecstatic *jouissance* meets a latent violent force.



Fig. 25. Megan Walch, *The Spill Series (Skullbone 1)*, detail, 2014.

There are three spatial matrices in this series of paintings – distance, middle and foreground – in which a limb pierces and exits the picture plane.



Fig. 26. Megan Walch, *The Spill Series (Skullbone 2)*, 2014.
Oil and enamel on composite panel, 130 x 130 cm. Private Collection, Australia.

The Spill Series (Skullbone 2) (Fig. 26) stages the dizzy moment before falling to the ground after spinning around with eyes fixed on a central point in the sky. I have become disoriented. I see a vaporous distance, a milky middle distance and foreground filigree like lichen, seaweed or foam. The vault of powder blue and pink blush references a Renaissance sky. Here is an atmosphere of refreshing elation.



Fig. 27. Megan Walch, *The Spill Series (Skullbone 3)*, 2015.
Oil and enamel on composite panel, 130 x 130 cm. Private Collection, Australia.

In *The Spill Series (Skullbone 3)* (Fig. 27), ornate layers of weathered bark, viscera and bone writhe diagonally across the earth or sky, shredding black and blue, night and day, in a disturbed flight of texture and movement. A viscous seam eddies along a vertiginous marbled void. Solid form is stretched and desiccated. Negative form becomes positive and returns to negative. Silver tarns pool in the left corner and glint as I move in front of the painting. *Skullbone 3*'s ardent fibre threatens to turn euphoria dark. But it sustains the orgasmic rush of the *Skullbone Suite* whilst fomenting something grotesque.

I created an illusionistic, recessive space using the wave matrix. This was achieved by pouring a mixture of low viscosity enamel and solvent tinted in a range of mid-tone blue and grey. The thin suspension generated a vaporous,

gaseous ether-space that connoted sea or sky. Painterly tidal lines in the fluid enamel created a meandering seam, like the knitting of bone between plates of a skull. I applied a thicker textured painted layer over this recessive space to articulate branch forms. This textural layer merged with the fluid ground in some areas and contrasted to it in others. The branch motif contrasts with the vaporous sky and contributes to an illusion of depth in the painting.

This operation of layering paint had a transformative effect on forms and spatial relations, and allowed me to configure forms and spaces that were unexpected. The images confuse figure and ground, as different layers cohere in some areas and separate in others. I eroded and then merged layers to create a new amalgamated foundation. There was a compression of layers and a dialogue between patches of matte and gloss. Sheen patches are reflective and matte patches are recessive. My acts of partial erasure embedded figures into the base layer, and I go on to elaborate my operations of erasure in relation to a definition of plasticity, which embraces the generation and destruction of form. Erasure can operate to minimise the difference between layers, but it also becomes a register of extreme compression that is tinged with an anti-humanist violence.



Fig. 28. Megan Walch, *The Spill Series (Skullbone 3)*, detail, 2015.

Breaches of form occurred in a number of ways through different demarcations of edges. I dispersed form and colour until it wept into aqueous fractal blooms, like culture growing in a Petri dish. A gaseous haze of paint was used as a means to dilute and partially obscure form. I used it as a compositional device to balance areas of dense, dark paint. This mist could take on the toxicity of smog or a celestial luminosity.



Fig. 29. Megan Walch, *The Spill Series (Satellitescape)*, 2015.
Oil, enamel and glitter on composite panel, 150 x 150 cm. Private Collection, Australia.

Clouds are a feature of my painting *The Spill Series (Satellitescape)* (Fig. 29), in which nature is viewed at a distance. Satellite images of earth, like NASA's famous 'Blue Marble', and images from the Bureau of Meteorology come to mind. Deep blue and silver simulate aerial photography of turbulent clouds, deltas, ice floes and lakes that flicker in the sun. Patches of pearlescence and mirror-black mark the unaltered surface of the picture plane. Silver pools of paint interfere with easy observation; they catch the light as I move in front of the work. When I am close, there is no static single point from which to see the entire image. These patches of reflective surface choreograph the viewer to move in front of the painting. Pockets of deep blue plunge us into oceanic drifts of recessive illusionistic space. Fine trails of black glitter beckon like sparkly sirens

of the picture plane before transporting the viewer by way of one of multiple vortices to a place where form is completely dissolved. There is no indication of the sequence in which the construction or destruction of layers occurred. When hung in a gallery, this painting requires far more light than a painting on white canvas. The black substrate and dark blue enamel pigments absorb the light while its silver patches reflect it. It operates as a vortex and appears to implode, to become dense and dark. This work beckons as a siren of ruinous attraction. It is at once menacing and melancholic. There is a sense of nostalgia; for this plane is being corrupted by forceful alteration.

I mixed enamel paint and solvents to corrupt their chemistry. I added incompatible elements like aluminium filings. Immiscible elements reacted to each other to create turbulent convection patterns, eddies, pustules and vortices. Aluminium filaments were suspended in the solution to register movement as silver particles flowed and curdled.



Fig. 30. Megan Walch, *The Spill Series (Satellitescape)*, detail, 2015.

This performance of paint mimicked patterns in nature. Rather than represent sea, earth and sky, the mixture re-presented nature by acting in accordance with natural conditions of gravity, temperature and airflow. These fluid matrices performed a kind of chemical mimesis. They generated a macro/micro topography.

Greg Dening, historian of the Pacific, replaces the word *represent* with *re-present* as a performative term that restages an action and brings it into the present.¹²³ I adopt Dening's terminology because the fluid grounds exist in space between re-presentation and performance.

The undulating interaction between spatial matrices contributes to movement in the painting. The images traverse figuration and abstraction,

¹²³ Dening, *Performances*.

switching between different viewpoints: you are looking through, as if you are looking up and down. The works appear to play out simultaneously on the surface and somewhere much deeper. Several spatial matrices exist in compressed and extended ether. Vortices manifest in the turbulence of these works to suck you into the painting and spit you out on the other side. Form is reconfigured by an exchange with other painterly layers, and it alters in response to its surroundings. There is a tension between these layers and no indication in which order they were constructed. Past and present have been conflated and their sequence is non-linear, but rather a pulsing expansion and contraction. I discuss this atemporality under the theme of plasticity.



Fig. 31. Megan Walch, *The Spill Series, Failure*, 2015.
Oil and enamel on composite panel, 150 x 150 cm.

When the syntax of my operations broke down, the ocular affect of the paintings was diluted. My failed paintings in this series reveal confusion, lack of clarity and direction. The paintings (Figs. 31 and 32) failed when the enamel pour did not function to set the stage for the bending of the spatial coordinates. This stage required a degree of recessive space in which to perform. If the enamel paint had too much dust embedded in its surface (due to wind and weather), and if old enamel paints contained floating pieces of congealed pigment, the illusion of depth could go no deeper than the picture plane. If the chroma of the paintings was muddy, dull and one-dimensional, there was no way of manipulating the spatial matrix.¹²⁴ The colour red was overpowering, it advances in space and is difficult to manipulate.

¹²⁴ These paintings are better represented in the photographs than in the flesh. Their lumpy surfaces and dull chromatic properties are minimised in photographs.

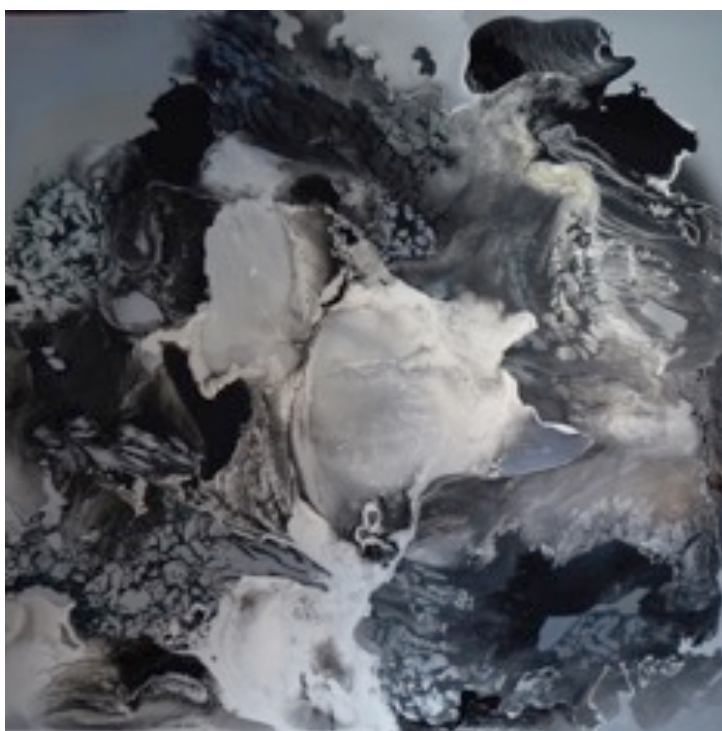


Fig. 32. Megan Walch, *The Spill Series*, Failure, 2015.
Oil and enamel on composite panel, 150 x 150 cm.

The central silver vortex (Fig. 32) resulted in compositional stasis counteracting diagonal movement in the image. I had mixed black and silver to make grey; mixing grey from multiple colours often creates nuance and depth, but these qualities were lacking in this binary form of grey. I discuss the materiality of colour under the subject of plasticity.

Failure, upheaval and disorder are generally productive ideas for paintings, but I wanted to communicate the potential of an alternative space as distinct from stagnancy, ugliness and dysfunction. Francois Jullien refers to Descartes' statement that representation demands clarity and that this then holds the power of

persuasion.¹²⁵

James Elkins argues that disorder in pictures is difficult to achieve and lends itself to images of the ‘beginnings’ and ‘ends’ of things.¹²⁶ My paintings *Spill Series (Satellite, Eschatalogue 1 and 2)* (Figs. 29, 45 and 48) express an apocalyptic sensibility. Pure chaos in painting is not only difficult to achieve but equally difficult to apprehend. Humans are hard-wired to seek (and find) order and symmetry in paintings. In Gestalt Psychology this is referred to as ‘closure’, which is “the process whereby incomplete forms, situations, etc., are completed subjectively by the viewer or seem to complete themselves; the tendency to create ordered and satisfying wholes.”¹²⁷

In a discussion of da Vinci’s stains, Ernst Gombrich asserts that without a framework, the flux of experience eludes assimilation and communication, and that where everything is possible and nothing unexpected, communication breaks down.¹²⁸ He writes: “An entirely fluid system would no longer serve its purpose; it could not register facts because it would lack pigeonholes. But how we arrange the first filing system is not entirely relevant.”¹²⁹ In my opinion, these paintings failed because they lacked the clarity of structure required for affect. Even paintings that are ambiguous need points of definition in order to be apprehended.

¹²⁵ Jullien, *The Great Image*.

¹²⁶ James Elkins, *On Pictures and the Words That Fail Them* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

¹²⁷ Oxford English Dictionary, “Closure, N.”, accessed 19 January, 2017, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/34641?rskey=1xxbEF&result=1>.

¹²⁸ Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, 76.

¹²⁹ Ibid.



Fig. 33. Operation one: The pouring, spilling and casting of fluid enamel paint.
Photograph Megan Walch.

I poured and cast fluid paint to predict the future of forms in the paintings. I did not know what would result. The construction of form and meaning from an indeterminate encounter resonated with the superstitious act of reading tea-leaves (tassology) or of entrails, or the casting of bones or runes to predict the future. I interpreted and translated the images that were suggested in random configurations of matter. These macro-micro correspondences were at the root of alchemy.¹³⁰ The first inklings of Western tasseography can be traced to medieval European fortune-tellers who developed their readings from splatters of wax, lead, and other molten substances.¹³¹ Forecasting is a language of possibilities – positive and negative, a form of baseless superstition – or tacit knowledge that came from intimately handling materials.

¹³⁰ Barrett and Bolt, *Carnal Knowledge*.

¹³¹ P. G. Maxwell-Stuart, *The Occult in Mediaeval Europe, 500-1500: A Documentary History* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

The Oxford English Dictionary defines the word ‘occult’ as “relating to magic, alchemy, astrology, theosophy or other practical arts held to involve agencies of a secret or mysterious nature.”¹³² The Surrealist André Breton advocated the liberation of irrational and subversive desires through the techniques of automatic writing, compulsive repetition, and the use of mediums and psychics.¹³³ Later in this chapter I discuss automatism as related to improvisation under the heading *Plasticity*. By allowing the material of fluid paint to predict the future of form, I resisted constructing paintings in a rational or preconceived way.

The ‘pour’ might also be a ‘spill’ – an accident or a will to deface. My response to the stain was to try and make ‘something good from the mess’. Tachisme, derived from the French word *tache* for stain, was a spontaneous style of French abstract painting that arose in the 1940s and 1950s in reaction to Cubism. It was part of a larger post-war movement known as Art Informel that abandoned geometric abstraction in favour of spontaneity of gesture and the expressive use of materials.¹³⁴ Art Informel’s rejection of preconceived ideas to construct paintings echoed techniques of Surrealist automatism and American Abstract Expressionism.¹³⁵ The Surrealists embraced techniques of automatic writing and drawing, free association and tools of divination. These tools were thought to liberate the unconscious as a revolutionary agent of invention and to

¹³² Oxford English Dictionary, "Occult, Adj. and N.", accessed 19 January, 2017, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/130166?rskey=ZFtlmJ&result=1>.

¹³³ Chenieux-Gendron, *Surrealism*.

¹³⁴ Bell, *Tachisme*.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

subvert the constraints of the conscious mind.¹³⁶ Bois and Kraus refer to Jean-François Lyotard's spatial logic of the unconscious as a 'matrix' (as distinct from the grid of structuralism) that folds contradictions together; Lyotard illustrates this with a crumpled piece of paper.¹³⁷ I discuss Surrealist automatism later in this chapter in relation to improvisation and plasticity under the heading *Improvisation, Tampering, Interference*.

Leonardo da Vinci developed images from stains on walls. Ernst Gombrich asserts that the amorphous forms of stains contain "the power of confused shapes", such as clouds or muddy water, to rouse the mind to new inventions.¹³⁸ Helen Frankenthaler invented stain painting using unprimed canvas. Stains are capable of stimulating the discovery of new forms and thus generating unanticipated compositions in paintings.¹³⁹

Pouring, casting and spilling fluid enamel paint onto the horizontal substrate was like throwing the dice in service of the aleatory. This resonated with the practice of 'flung ink' performed by Zen Buddhist monks in China. Monks would meditate for long periods of time before casting ink onto paper. The resultant forms were said to harness contingency and to represent the current conditions of the universe outside the frame. According to Norman Bryson, the Japanese philosopher Nishitani claimed that this was a non-representational practice and "the way to open painting to a randomness that reflects the outside

¹³⁶ Chenieux-Gendron, *Surrealism*.

¹³⁷ Bois and Krauss, *Formless*.

¹³⁸ Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, 159.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

world.”¹⁴⁰ The practice of flung ink traditionally used absorbent paper, whereas in this project, fluid paint spread and then lay in tension on the impervious substrate, forming a skin on the fragile surface. There was no absorption, and moisture could only evaporate from one side. The substrate I use is an impermeable industrial surface, as distinct from an absorbent organic one.



Fig. 34. Sesshu Toyo, *Haboku Landscape*, detail, 1495.
Ink, 149 x 33 cm. Tokyo National Museum.

Lindy Lee is an Australian artist of Chinese heritage who has expanded upon the tradition of flung ink painting by flinging molten bronze onto concrete foundry floors to generate wall works and sculptures. The online catalogue for the exhibition at the Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery in 2014, *Fire Over Heaven*, describes the

¹⁴⁰ Norman Bryson, "The Gaze in the Expanded Field," in *Vision and Visuality Discussions in Contemporary Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988).

philosophy of flung ink: “Although the marks appear to be made from chance, the spiritual understanding is that the patterns formed are caused from the interconnection of all conditions that exist in the universe in that moment. Within these marks, the energy and totality of the entire cosmos is embodied.”¹⁴¹ Lee’s practice of flung ink painting resonates with feelings of spontaneity, release and renewal whilst offering us an expanded view of our intimate relationship with nature and the universe.



Fig. 35. Lindy Lee, *Heaven Over Fire*, detail, 2014.
Molten bronze, installation. Kochi-Muziris Biennale, Aspinwall House, Fort Kochi, India.

In conclusion, I tested and suspended the unpredictable fluidity of the medium as a method to create new forms and ambiguous spaces. The pouring,

¹⁴¹ Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, “Lindy Lee, Fire Over Heaven,” accessed 19 January, 2017, <http://www.roslynoxley9.com.au/news/releases/2014/10/08/259/>.

casting and spilling of fluid paint were my first operations in a syntax that was configured to undermine linear perspective. By using this process I harnessed uncertainty and contingency. The spreading of fluid paint upon the horizontal substrate was used to connote that which was plural and lateral, and it resulted in wave-like matrices.

Fluidity could be inventive and utopian, or entropic and ruinous. The paintings navigate a path between liquefaction and the congelation of form. Between invention and eccentricity on one hand, and entropy and homogeneity on the other. Between possibility and petrification.

These operations were an act of forecasting the future of form in paintings. It was a means by which I de-centred my authorship such that I instead performed as a collaborator or orchestrator. This operation echoed the technique of Surrealist and Chinese flung ink; it was a rejection of prescriptive rational ideas used to conceive imagery.

Fluid properties privileged transitional, turbulent and kinetic properties in the paintings. The works in the first *Skullbone Suite* are anthropomorphic and humanist. There is a tinge of euphoria or romanticism; an exuberance at the prospect of transformation as a result of erasure, alteration and potential collapse.

The failed paintings were a result of a lack of clarity in the fluid chaos. The disorder of the failures was not productive because it was difficult to apprehend, and optically their 'affect' was diluted. The works were successful when they appeared to move, and they failed when they remained static. At the

pictorial level, the successful paintings were unstable, and they appeared to continuously transform. Each encounter with the work yielded different combinations. Cognitively, we can recreate them differently with each visit; an objective reading of them does not exist. The forms may be fixed, but their readings are not. I suggest that an enlargement of perception can occur when we are open to collaboration with fluidity in images.

2.3 Plasticity

This section is an account of how plasticity manifested in my project through the operations of improvisation, addition and erasure. I harnessed the agency of paint as a driver of pictorial content. The fluid painterly matrices directed my responses and the ways in which subsequent forms emerged. Improvisation required of me a heightened state of responsiveness. Plasticity embraces contradictory positions simultaneously; it holds extremes together and they in turn act upon each other in nuanced tension. The interaction of opposing forces generates form and movement in the paintings. Their influence was kinetic, unstable and non-sequential. Improvisation in painting is a plastic operation.

In this chapter I describe a suite of works in the *Spill Series* titled *The Rough Guide*, in which limbs are twisted, dismembered and reassembled, and the soft tissue of the paintings perforates to register the violence of systemic pressure; however, they retain their irrepressible vitality.



Fig. 36. Megan Walch, *The Spill Series (The Rough Guide 1)*, 2013-16. Oil and enamel on composite panel, 130 x 130 cm. Collection of the artist.

The Spill Series (The Rough Guide 1 and 2) (Figs. 36 and 38) exist in shallow pictorial space, like models assembled from a compendium of forms. *The Spill Series (The Rough Guide 1)* (Fig. 36) is a vertical character generated from the collision of shape, texture and colour. A calligraphic sweep creates a milky skeleton interwoven with branches. A polychrome Lichtenstein 'brushstroke' (Fig. 37) imitates spontaneous gesture, its mannered tongue unfurls as sea spray or white foam. This twisting cyclonic sinew might have been spun from the metallic field; forms appear to emerge from and subside back into this grey mixture. Sweeps of quinacrodone and vermillion deny easy aesthetic pleasure as we witness the torsion of mutation in progress.



Fig. 37. Roy Lichtenstein, *Big Painting 6*, 1965.
Oil and Magna on canvas, 235 x 330 cm. Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf.

In *The Spill Series* (*The Rough Guide 1* and *2*) (Figs. 36 and 38), metallic grey fields are pockmarked with violently splattered solvent. These marks resemble algal bloom or condensation and they assert the presence of the picture plane.

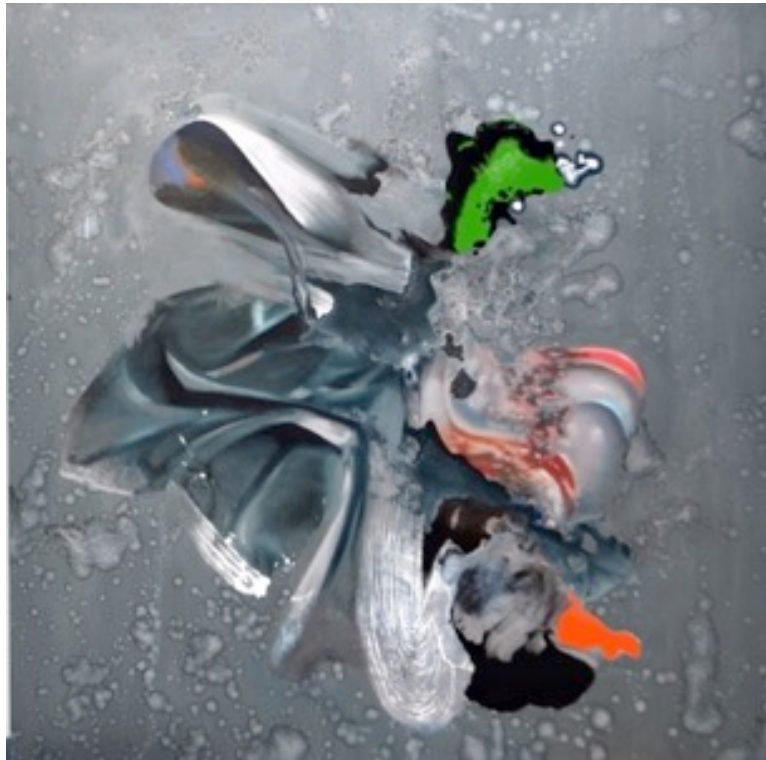


Fig. 38. Megan Walch, *The Spill Series (The Rough Guide 2)*, 2013-16. Oil and enamel on composite panel, 130 x 130 cm. Collection of the artist.

In *The Spill Series (The Rough Guide 2.)* (Fig. 38), forms are compromised as they twist and buckle. Structures coalesce and unravel to congeal again. An image of crushed duct-tape weeps and splatters. Turgid vermillion viscera become elastic. Gloss black and orange enamel sit with unabsorbed tension on the fragile surface of the picture plane. Pooled, viscous lime puckers with the texture of milk that has formed a skin on this chaotic, compressed hybrid. Figuration/abstraction, congelation of form/dispersal of form, matte/gloss, macro/micro, control/spontaneity, subject/object, fixed/fluidity – the interplay between opposing forces is the engine that drives transformation of form in the paintings. These mutually configuring intensities generate agitation when placed in relation to one another.

I returned repeatedly to rework these two images after long periods of time. They became a glossary of painterly terms for the project. The syntax of my operations began with a calligraphic sweep of liquefied enamel that registered my gesture and with which I then proceeded to interfere. I flirted with spontaneous splashes and liquid pools. Physical trace, viscera and vapour collided and feigned ejaculation, suggesting the violent tension and pressure required for the compression of these forms – extracted, synthesised then examined against a neutral backdrop from which they continue to emerge and subside. A shallow depth of field renders them as portraits of pet mutants in a diorama.

Drawing upon the thought of the dissident Surrealist Georges Bataille and his theory of the *informe* – which was translated by Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss's in their account of 'the Formless' as that which is resistant to form and is the alteration of form – erasure and undoing of form consequently includes the generation of "bad form."¹⁴² The theory of contemporary French philosopher Catherine Malabou offers a philosophical conception of plasticity that resonates with Bataille's notion of the *informe*. Etymologically, plasticity relates to 'model' and to 'mould', the capacity both to give and to receive shape and structure.¹⁴³ Malabou's theory shows how form undoes, alters and reconfigures itself. According to Malabou, plasticity's currency is contradiction. It is both the creation of shape and structure and its annihilation; plasticity holds extremes

¹⁴² Bois and Krauss, *Formless*, 108.

¹⁴³ Malabou, "The Future of Hegel".

together to configure one another.¹⁴⁴ Materialising mutability is a plastic operation. Malabou's theory of plasticity extends to a theory of temporal plasticity that destroys accepted linear definitions of past and future.¹⁴⁵

In a description of the theory of 'affect', Melissa Gregg uses similar terminology to Malabou. She writes: "Affect arises in the capacities to act and be acted upon."¹⁴⁶ 'Affect' is the circulation of visceral 'intensities' and 'resonances' that pass body-to-body – human and nonhuman – that register alongside conscious knowing.¹⁴⁷ The paintings in this series continue to corrupt a sense of optimism, and exert increasing levels of strain on the organs of painterly forms until membranes are breached, herniate, rupture and splatter.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Ahmed, "Happy Objects", 1.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.



Fig. 39. Megan Walch, *The Spill Series (The Rough Guide 3)*, 2014. Oil and enamel on composite panel, 130 x 130 cm. Collection of the artist.

In *The Spill Series (The Rough Guide 3)* (Fig. 39), an aerial orientation shifts to snow crystals or spores in a galactic Petri dish. An eruption appears to occur from behind a membranous plane upon which a mannered gesture sweeps downwards to congeal. This molten avalanche grows tumescent to pierce the picture-plane in a dollop – like cream or car duco. It ranges through ice floes and cloud flows, it threatens to burst.



Fig. 40. Megan Walch, *The Spill Series (Extreme Ikebana)*, 2014-15. Oil and enamel on composite panel, 130 x 130cm. Collection of the artist.

Figures in *The Spill Series (Extreme Ikebana)* (Fig. 40) coalesce, coagulate and warp. A tangled thicket of calligraphic thonging weaves through painterly slag to exit the picture at simulated speed. These strands of ligature optically suture folds of pink sumo-flesh to surrounding space before piercing the picture plane. I inflate forms to become pneumatic before exploding and shattering them as if shot from the side by a gun in a violent computer game. These splatters sit in unabsorbed tension on the surface of the painting. Figure and ‘ground’ wrestle with one another. Elasticity indicates torsion; there is the possibility that figures might stretch until they fragment and scatter through space. Or they may interpenetrate until their co-mingling creates a new composite. Here the figure-ground distinction is undergoing change – a brutal disfigurement or strangulation.

The figure-ground distinction is fundamental to our visual apprehension of the world. The delineation of form against 'background' is used to distinguish objects and renders them visible. If an object cannot be isolated, defined or delineated, it becomes camouflaged. If space is perceived as full and fluid rather than static and empty, it becomes a three-dimensional medium that envelops us. When there is a principle of equivalence, does background or foreground even exist? The figure-ground relationship can be an analogy for how we exist as separate or non-separate from our environment. It is a visual index for defining our sense of self, or lack of it. Contrast *creates* meaning, and without difference an object has no limits. In *Extreme Ikebana*, the figure-ground distinction is pliable and undergoing strain.



Fig. 41. Megan Walch, *The Spill Series (Tipping Point)*, 2015.
Oil and enamel on composite panel, 130 x 130 cm. Collection of the artist.

In *The Spill Series (Tipping Point)* (Fig.41), I populated the painterly pour with minute dots that would disperse in a lava-flow before plummeting into a deep geological gash – a plunging dark central void is witnessed from a hovering remove. Fragments like platforms of rock are suspended over the precipice of a gravitational vortex whilst defying gravity. Stretched bands of elastic flesh coalesce in a tangle at the right of the image. Flesh tone is mediated to appear plastic-pink and contrived, as if shining a torch through my hand, or flensing the first layers of skin. Pink struggles with black and black deadens the chroma of any colour that it comes into contact with. These operations are like abstractions of screen energy, containing a psychology of excess that accompanies obliteration and reconfiguration. As with *Satellitescape*, a vortex allures us to a ruinous attraction, evacuation and expulsion.

2.4 Improvisation, Tampering, Interference

After the enamel matrices were dry, I interfered with form and space in the paintings. I improvised upon shapes that were suggested in the fluid paint. Improvisation occurred in the painterly processes of layering, grafting and synthesising. It happened when I had rehearsed the techniques for conveying illusion in painting and automatically recalled the appropriate tropes: a flick or spatter of paint, a section of carefully moulded form, a calligraphic gesture or wipe, a patch of sanded paint, a patch of glitter and a patch left empty. These were not spontaneous or purely automatic gestures. There was a flirtation between control and the momentary relinquishing of control. Sometimes my body registered in the painting through marks made by hand, and sometimes my interference was minimal and disguised so it did not even register as an intervention. This was neither a form of Surrealist automatism nor the impulsive gesture of Abstract Expressionism. Rather, I was engaged in a reciprocal relationship of control and lack of control. Interference occurred in the form of weather: temperature, humidity and gravity influenced the performance of enamel paint. It opened the work to the operations of the outside world. I would direct and transform these configurations to develop them further.

Surrealist André Breton advocated the liberation of irrational and subversive desires through the techniques of automatic writing, compulsive repetition, and the use of mediums and psychics.¹⁴⁸ Automatic writing supposedly

¹⁴⁸ Jemima Montagu, *The Surrealists: Revolutionaries in Art & Writing, 1919-1935* (Tate Gallery, 2002).

liberates the subconscious and delivers suppressed aspects of the psyche in a poetic and dreamlike fashion.¹⁴⁹ Breton's notion of 'pure psychic automatism' and Louis Althusser's notion of 'aleatory materialism' ('materialism of the encounter') proposed that an arbitrary event could configure a unique situation or structure that subverts the ideals of rational order.¹⁵⁰ Surrealist artists often found that their use of 'automatic drawing' was not entirely automatic. Instead it involved some form of conscious intervention to make the image or painting visually acceptable or comprehensible.¹⁵¹ André Masson admitted that his 'automatic' imagery involved a two-fold process of unconscious and conscious activity.¹⁵² Malabou asserts that plasticity is the ability to both give and to receive form.¹⁵³ Both paint and painter possess agency. Mine was a playful tampering – the ebb and flow of action and response. I entered into a relationship of collaboration with the materials and processes.

Justin Paton describes the responsiveness of the painting process in his article *The Art of Creating a Sense of Necessity with Paint*:

¹⁴⁹ Chenieux-Gendron, *Surrealism*.

¹⁵⁰ Vittorio Morfino, *Plural Temporality [Electronic Resource]: Transindividuality and the Aleatory between Spinoza and Althusser*, Historical Materialism Book Series. (Leiden: BRILL, 2014).

¹⁵¹ Montagu, *The Surrealists*.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Malabou, "The Future of Hegel".

*This is the feeling that the surface in front of you is beginning to develop needs, telling you what kind of picture it wants to be. Even when you are doing nothing more than attempting the simplest copy, every stroke demands a counterstroke, every colour requires an adjustment of another, and because the medium is fluid, viscous, sticky, volatile, a quiet urgency also enters the equation.*¹⁵⁴

[...]

*The thoughts that matter in painting are not lined up beforehand to be put into or clipped onto the painting. The thoughts that matter most emerge from the painting, like heat rising off a compost heap.*¹⁵⁵

The American Abstract Expressionists worked in the nexus between Surrealism and abstraction. Their interest in materiality eclipsed realism, and Jackson Pollock improvised with spontaneous Surrealist methods that were thought to provide access to the unconscious.¹⁵⁶ His search for ritual and myth, combined with his interest in indigenous art, was used to construct a bold new point of view in reaction to the historical and political moment.¹⁵⁷

Improvising with the fluid and plastic properties of paint allowed me to harness contingency and indeterminacy as methods to generate uncertain or doubtful forms and spaces in paintings that respond to my historical and political

¹⁵⁴ Paton, *Necessity and Glut*, 18.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁵⁶ Siegel, *Abstract Expressionism*, 18.

¹⁵⁷ Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism*.

moment. By engaging the unpredictable agency of fluid enamel paint, I entered into a dynamic with the medium that, I propose, enabled a shift in my subjectivity. Bolt, Barrett and Bennett propose that subject-object relations change when we attribute agency to matter.¹⁵⁸ It could be argued that this skilful flirtation with loss of control served to heighten my mastery and manipulation of the material. This may have been the case, but the operation of improvisation required me to be in a receptive state; it demanded a heightened degree of responsiveness to place me in the flow of painterly events as they unfolded.

The paintings progressed through a series of small conditional decisions into which the pre-rehearsed tropes would be inserted, like improvisation in jazz. This decision-making and problem solving required attentiveness and receptiveness to painterly reactions in order for me to respond and interact with the liquid paint in flux. In a discussion titled *Why Are Conceptual Artists Painting Again? Because They Think It's a Good Idea*, writer and critic Jan Verwoert asserts that painting gives us the ability to invent our own systems of judgment while it creates a continuous flow of possibilities.¹⁵⁹ Painting can be about contingent decision making, with no dramatic endgame or *a priori* answer.¹⁶⁰ He advocated this language of agency and possibility for painting.¹⁶¹

Barbara Bolt examines knowledge gained through the handling of

¹⁵⁸ Bolt, *Art Beyond Representation*.

¹⁵⁹ Jan Verwoert, "Why Are Conceptual Artists Painting Again? Because They Think That It's a Good Idea," *United Nations Plaza Archive* (2008), <http://www.unitednationsplaza.org/video/54/>. (Accessed 25 August 2015)

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

materials and the “performative power of materiality”.¹⁶² She suggests that it is in the process of handling materials that artists acquire ‘insights’ significant to knowledge creation. She refers to this as a ‘co-emergent practice’, in which the creator is ‘co-responsible’ for the creation of work – the artist is a ‘collaborator’ with materials, weather conditions and gravity.¹⁶³ Bolt argues that cooperation is a relationship not centred on the self-conscious subject, and that this constitutes a different subjectivity, as distinct from a Western tradition in which mastery of materials services representation.¹⁶⁴ Bolt cites Heidegger’s notion of ‘handlability’ in which the spontaneity of practice has its own rhythm and logic and, through handling materials, tools and objects, we are in the middle of possibility where the tight grip of representation can be loosened.¹⁶⁵

Bolt’s collaborator Estelle Barrett concludes:

*We can now assert that performativity in creative production involves an interaction between the subject (artist) as material process, as being and feeling – and the subject as signifying process, as sense-making. In the making and viewing of art, experience-in-practice materialises or makes available to consciousness, a new object of knowledge. [emphasis in original]*¹⁶⁶

When I was engaged with the contingent properties of the painted medium I was in a state of heightened receptiveness. These sessions lasted many

¹⁶² Bolt, *Art Beyond Representation*.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 11-51.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Barrett and Bolt, *Carnal Knowledge*, 68.

continuous hours, and I prepared for them in advance by checking weather forecasts, cooking food and scheduling uninterrupted blocks of time. When I was working with wet paint there was a heightened level of risk. Fluid paint could generate structures that were unexpected, distinctive and luminous, or if I overworked or mixed the paint too much, the medium became dull, homogeneous and entropic. My compulsion was to fiddle and tamper with the painting, but there were times when I needed to leave it alone.



Fig. 42. Megan Walch, *The Spill Series (Rough Guide)*, Failure, 2014.
Oil and enamel on composite panel, 130 x 130 cm.

I consider *The Spill Series (Rough Guide)* (Fig. 42) to be a failed painting because it became too fussy, busy, contrived and static. I destroyed the tension between spontaneous gestures and emergent form because I kept interfering with them. The relationship between my agency and the painting's agency needed to be

one of suspense; neither operation should dominate the painting. This painting appears overcrowded, twee and stagnant. It is an irritating painting.

The interplay between control and lack of control might be considered an updated form of Surrealist automatism. This processual shift relocated me as an agent of orchestration, manipulation, collaboration and responsiveness. The relationship between form and deformation was a conscious interplay of different pictorial languages of manipulation and spontaneity. They were separate realms in collision, expressing the tension between states that are associated with polar entities. These two states were no longer separate; the boundary between them was fluid.

I employed the unpredictable properties of paint and contingency in order to interfere with my role of authorship. Yet it was insufficient for me to leave the paint alone to do its own thing. I wanted to respond to the painted configurations. When I tampered with the shapes in the paintings, I ended up making mannered and stylised forms. I examine mannerism in relation to the subjective alteration of form in response to pictorial convention in the next chapter.

Barbara Bolt, Estelle Barrett and Jane Bennett propose a new way of thinking about materiality: that non-human bodies are ‘actants’ rather than mute, static objects, and that this change in perspective shifts humans from the centre of an ontological hierarchy and minimises the difference between subjects and objects.¹⁶⁷ Bolt refers to this as an embodied form of painting and a new form of

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.; Bolt, *Art Beyond Representation*; Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*.

materialism. However, the term ‘embodied’ asserts the centrality of the maker. In a discussion of ‘affect’, Barrett argues that “the centrality of the subject and human agency in meaning-making processes does not negate the agency of objects.”¹⁶⁸ As an improviser of painterly processes, I was central to the performance, and I was also a collaborator. I refer to a de-centred perspective as an eccentric one, in which the axis of our consciousness is not placed centrally.

2.5 Eccentricity

Eccentricity, n. 1. The quality of being abnormally centred; of not being concentric; of not having the axis in the centre.[...]

*4. a. The quality or habit of deviating from what is usual or regular; irregularity, oddity, whimsicality.*¹⁶⁹

Ideas surrounding materials and their agency might appear to be new in contemporary Western culture, but they have long existed in other cultures. Shintoism and Animism are but two ancient belief systems in which animate and inanimate objects are considered to have agency and to possess their own spirits. In many nature-oriented religions, subject-object relations are not dualistic. ‘New Materialism’ is not that new!

The Gutai group was a radical, post-war artistic movement in Japan, founded in 1954 by the painters Jiro Yoshihara and Shozo Shimamoto. Gutai emphasised the relationship between body and matter in pursuit of performative

¹⁶⁸ Barrett and Bolt, *Carnal Knowledge*, 65.

¹⁶⁹ Oxford English Dictionary, "Eccentricity, N."

immediacy and the desire to physically engage with materials.¹⁷⁰ The body was not prioritised over the materials themselves; rather it was seen as collaborating with the material.¹⁷¹ Among Gutai's concerns were the reciprocal connection between matter and human physical action, and the aesthetic that arises when things become damaged or decayed.¹⁷² Gutai struck up a transnational dialogue with Art Informel, whose members sought to subvert the constraints of the conscious with improvisatory methods and gestural techniques similar to those used by the Surrealists.¹⁷³ The Gutai group regularly sent their bulletins to Jackson Pollock.¹⁷⁴ Art Informel's improvisatory methodology and gestural technique were informed by the Surrealist doctrine of automatism. Informel emerged where strict composition gave way to the spontaneous painting processes, calligraphic signs, a tendency to lyrical abstraction, and in the interplay of control and chance.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁰ Tiampo, *Gutai: Decentering Modernism*.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.



Fig. 43. Shozo Shimamoto, *Performance in China 4*, 2007.
Acrylic on canvas, 205 x 140 cm. Image courtesy of De Buck Gallery.

Synergies between theories of ‘affect’, Francois Jullien’s translation of the Chinese philosophy of ‘the foundational’, Bataille’s ‘*informe*’, and Malabou's theory of plasticity acknowledge constant movement and exchange in the territory between opposites. They all share claims to have no fixed terms, and they disrupt stable distinctions between alternating opposites to operate somewhere in between. The unstable interplay between pictorial elements of positive space/negative space, fluid form/congealed form, matte/gloss, macrocosm/microcosm produced an optical affect by which the paintings appear to shift and transform. The equivalence between positive and negative space has been a consistent element in my painting. Empty space is full space and full space is empty. In *Green and Orange versus Black* (Fig. 44), plasticity occurs in the interpenetration of presence by absence.



Fig. 44. Megan Walch, *The Spill Suite (Green and Orange versus Black)*, 2016.
Oil and enamel on composite panel, 150 x 150 cm. Collection of the artist.



Fig. 45. Megan Walch, *The Spill Series (Eschatalogue 2)*, 2016.
Oil and enamel on composite panel, 150 x 150 cm. Collection of the artist.

In *Eschatalogue I* blue fluidity meets pockets of resistance as cameos of a fiery hell.

This union of opposites is a plastic operation. Francois Jullien's translation of traditional Chinese landscape painting places value on the pictorial effects of haziness, atmosphere and indistinctness in combination with the representation of solid forms; fullness constitutes emptiness – they are structurally inseparable.¹⁷⁶ Jullien claims that the artist and the environment were connected using hand, brush and ink as a conduit articulated by the breath. Breathing was used to bring the outside world inside and vice versa in a principle of non-separation between perceived subject and object.¹⁷⁷ In contrast, subject and object are distinctly separate categories in the tradition of Western thought. Conditions of non-duality are at play in notions of affect and new materialism; subject-object relations are no longer dualistic. The principle of non-duality was one of the goals of meditation in the Chinese practice of flung ink painting. Jane Bennett proposes that all bodies are modes of a common substance, that various and variable materialities morph, evolve, collide and congeal, and that consciousness and materiality are mutually constitutive, enfolded and emergent.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁶ Jullien, *The Great Image*.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*.

2.6 Erasure

The addition and erasure of paint is a plastic operation. According to Malabou, plasticity is "the emergence and annihilation of form" and is "self-engendering and self-destroying". She concludes that plasticity can be entropic: "therefore plasticity is susceptible to petrification".¹⁷⁹

After the fluid painterly matrices were dry, I used the operation of erasure to interfere with shapes and to alter the spatial properties of the painting. I used the combination of an orbital sander and sanding by hand with different grades of paper in an effort to alter the spatial structure. My acts of erasure synthesised layers and created a dialogue between surfaces of matte and gloss; the enamel paint revealed its internal marbled stratification (Fig. 47). I was able to make contrasting elements interpenetrate through the process of sanding, which conflated them into a sheen surface.

¹⁷⁹ Malabou, "The Future of Hegel", 193.



Fig. 46. Megan Walch, *The Spill Series (Skullbone 3)*, 2014.
Oil and enamel on composite panel 130 x 130 cm. Collection of the artist.



Fig. 47. Megan Walch, *The Spill Series (Satellitescape)*, detail, 2015.

Unanticipated patches of form and colour emerged. Matte surfaces produced absorbing recessive spaces. They appeared to penetrate below the picture plane to create pockets of deep space. The high gloss surfaces were reflective and salient; they projected from the picture plane. Their reflectivity repelled my gaze from the surface. The dialogue between matte and gloss was essential to the push-pull dynamic in the paintings. The interplay between surface effects of repulsion and attraction generated movement and instability in the painting; it puckered and pleated the spatial logic. Revealing the relationship between multiple layers in the paintings spawned a sense of shallow depth, suggesting that the viewer can penetrate the picture plane and reach around and behind seams and strata. This resonates with Timotheus Vermeulen's description of 'The New Depthiness', in which the proliferation of surface treatments is a charting of alternatives and possibilities, "a *performative* reappraisal of depth" [emphasis in original].¹⁸⁰

A performative exploration of depth was occurring as I compressed spaces and forms in a single frame in order to visualise and understand the relationships between them. In the effort to manipulate form and space, I continued to deface the images further. The pressure of sanding the paint eroded and frayed the edges of forms, embedding them into their surroundings, erasing evidence of a seam. I improvised a layer of painterly form and allowed it to dry before erasing parts so that the fluid grounds emerged *through* and merged *with* the covering layer.

¹⁸⁰ Timotheus Vermeulen, "The New 'Depthiness'," *e-flux* 61 (2015), <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/the-new-depthiness/>.

Layering was akin to collage in that it revealed unanticipated spaces and forms in ways that I would have been unable to predict. Louis Aragon claimed that the method of collage used by the Surrealists superseded automatism and gave them access to ‘unexpected disorder’ in their painting.¹⁸¹ He called this process ‘the marvellous’.¹⁸² In Jullien’s translation of a traditional pictorial philosophy of Chinese painting, ‘*miao*’ is translated as ‘marvellous’, and it expresses the excellence of that which comes from the undifferentiated source of form.¹⁸³ Over the course of the thesis, ‘the marvellous’ mutates to become increasingly base, aggressive, inorganic and anti-human.

By partially erasing forms, I made the surface a register of the pressure and violent force required when I hacked into the substrate to reveal raw aluminium. The result was not entirely predictable, as paint adhered to form strong bonds in some areas and peeled away in others. This was a form of depiction – of undoing form. In this project, destruction was tethered to creation as an engine to drive the transformation of form and the proliferation of surfaces.

Rosalind Krauss and Hal Foster refer to Bataille’s proposition that the will to make an image on a cave wall did not come from the desire for representation or the narcissism of “I was here”, but from the will to deface and deform – a sadistic will to alteration.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸¹ Lucy R. Lippard, ed. *Surrealists on Art* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970).

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Jullien, *The Great Image*.

¹⁸⁴ Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*.

My erasures revealed layers and strata in the painting process while embedding forms into their surroundings to create the absence of difference – the absence of difference is an operation of the *informe*, according to Bataille.¹⁸⁵ This process of layering and erasing to create several spatial matrices is expressed thus by Rosalind Krauss: “This work of the matrix is then to overlay contradiction and to create the simultaneity of logically incompatible situations. This is an alternate to the transparently self-explanatory structuralist grid.”¹⁸⁶

Jullien asserts that for the Chinese scholar, the necessary condition of painting is the dissolution of the subject, and that the act of de-picting is a reciprocal act of apprehending form by dissolving it.¹⁸⁷ He goes on to claim that ‘de-piction’ is a repudiation of, and liberation from, the restrictive character of categorising things that are embedded in the fictional logic of the concrete.¹⁸⁸

Jullien writes that emptiness and ‘de-saturation’ were spiritualised by the Chinese, and that “painting and physics understand each other, especially regarding the operative characteristics of the void, with which China was familiar early on.”¹⁸⁹ The Chinese conceived of reality only in its constant mutation, and, for the Chinese painter, to fix on a representation is to dilute the power of the ‘foundational’, claims Jullien.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁵ Bois and Krauss, *Formless*.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 107.

¹⁸⁷ Jullien, *The Great Image*, 59-73.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 239.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 59-73.

The merging and emerging of layers revealed a history of the painting and a conversation with the medium. There was no indication in what order layers were added, subtracted and manipulated. These operations of addition and erasure were not performed in a predictable or logical sequence. Some parts of the painting were not interfered with; other parts would be painted, erased and painted again. I chose to work within a limited range of texture, palette and motif in order to deepen my understanding of how these elements were put into play. A multiplicity of colour and form would have become a distracting cacophony that would divert and confuse my efforts to express possibilities of spatial manipulation in depth.

In the exhibition *Forever Now*, curated by Laura Hoptman at the Museum of Modern Art in 2014, atemporality is presented as a salient property of contemporary painting. Atemporality describes a phenomenon that characterises our current Internet condition in which all eras exist at once.¹⁹¹ It was coined by science-fiction writer William Gibson and employed by Hoptman to describe “art-making that is inspired by, refers to, or avails itself of styles, subjects, motifs, materials, strategies and ideas from an array of periods on the art-historical timeline.”¹⁹² Hoptman reaffirms Gibson’s claim that atemporality is a form of resistance to linear notions of time and offers a challenge to its attendant ideas of progress and expansion.¹⁹³ Painting is well adapted to re-present conditions of atemporality, owing to the medium’s affinity with layering, collaging and

¹⁹¹ Hoptman and Museum of Modern Art, *Forever Now*.

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

synthesising of disparate elements to co-exist on a single surface. Atemporality supports a plastic, non-linear trajectory of time that contradicts conventional thinking – in chapter three, I discuss painting as a site of resistance to classical and orthodox conventions.

2.7 Plasticity and a Materiality of Colour

In the studio, I observed the interactions and conjunctions of colours, with a focus on colour opposites. Colour is a character in the pictures, and colour is content. A discussion of the complexity and contingency of colour is not central to this exegesis. It would require an analysis of surface transmission and emission properties, coupled with the nature of illumination and the perceiving eye and brain. Our responses are subjective and therefore difficult to analyse or quantify. However, colour's relationship with plasticity is central to this project. Colour produces an ocular 'affect' that is felt in the body. We are emotionally influenced by colour, and it has the capacity to influence our physical responses. This is a materiality of colour. Although outdated, Goethe's *Theory of Colour* emphasises unity within the system of light, colour and perception. Goethe considered colour to be an incidence of the interpenetration of mind and nature rather than an illusory effect.¹⁹⁴

When contrasting colours are placed side by side, they oscillate. When complementary colours mix, they neutralise one another. When harmonious

¹⁹⁴ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Charles Lock Eastlake, *Goethe's Theory of Colours*, [1st ed., Cass Library of Science Classics (London: Cass, 1967).

colours combine, they expand spatially to become incandescent. In this project, colour became a tool for conditions of mixing, and colour operated as a metaphor.

Colour in the three suites of paintings evolved from familiar naturalistic blues and browns to greys, and artificial pinks to synthetic blasts of colour that are unmixed and industrial. The paintings progress from organic to inorganic – from humanist to anti-humanist.

I mixed paint and observed the interaction of colour. I was constantly toying with chroma breaking down, and risked merging them too far. When colours are mixed, their interaction becomes a subject in itself. James Elkins writes that there is very little written about what happens “when one colour struggles with another until they both weaken. Those are important meanings and states of mind and they need words.”¹⁹⁵ As I observed discordant colour edges collide and corrupt each other, the interaction of colour provided me with an analogue of the cross-cultural.

The blurring of borders occurs in the territory between edges of colour. The collision of pigments creates a meeting point where new colour is created. Colour mixing is contingent on the properties of the contributing components: the viscosity of the solution and the saturation of pigment in the medium. Coloured solutions can be corrupted so that immiscible colour edges fray and desiccate. Colours can overpower one another. Red is the bully of the palette; it must be carefully monitored so as not to overpower other colours. Black is the killer of

¹⁹⁵ Elkins, *What Painting Is*, 122.

chroma; it is banned from a traditional palette for this reason. In the final *Spill Suite* black is pitted against unmixed industrial colour in a 'Fight Club' scenario in which colour mixing can result in emergence or entropy. Resistance to mixing is discussed in chapter three.

My experimentation with blending colour opposites began in 1996 as I observed pollution on the Los Angeles horizon. The interaction of sky blue and smog mixed to create a toxic cyan. The colour was both repulsive and beautiful.

When I mixed opposite (complementary) colours, their chroma was weakened. This neutralisation of colour created complex tones, shadow tones and distant tones. When I mixed harmonious colours, they grew voluminous and luminous. I used two techniques of working wet-into-wet. One occurred when I used badger-hair brushes to blend pigment suspended in large quantities of linseed oil. The other technique involved pouring fluid suspensions of enamel pigments. Working wet-into-wet resulted in a fluid exchange of properties; the paint formed a single surface or skin that mimicked photographic emulsion. This surface sheen connoted a mediated screen space.

Blues and blacks created recessive and naturalistic spaces. Lime green and orange are colours of aggressive contamination. My experiments with red failed. Red is difficult to manipulate, it likes to play the leading role and theatrically advances in space while overshadowing the performance of the other colour characters.

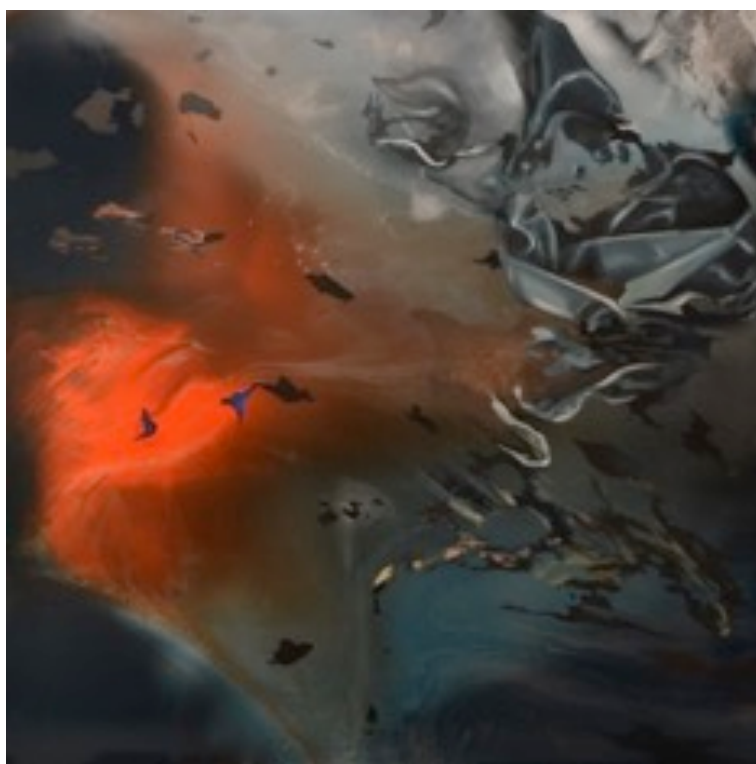


Fig. 48. Megan Walch, *The Spill Series (Eschatalogue 1)*, 2016.
Oil, enamel and glitter on composite enamel, 150 x 150 cm.
Artemisia Collection, Australia.

In *The Spill Series (Eschatalogue 1)* (Fig. 48), I mixed the colour opposites orange and teal blue. I was mixing colour as a metaphor for the arid and the aqueous. I wanted to observe how these complementary colours interacted in fluid enamel. The intensity of saturated orange enamel dissipated and was neutralised as it flowed and mixed with dark blue. It conjured images of alchemical weather, or the aftermath of a supernova as viewed through the Hubble Telescope. *The Spill Series (Satellitescape, Eschatalogue 1 and 2)* (Figs. 29 and 48) mimic alchemical cosmic events and toxic flows, as if from a remove, conjuring the melancholic incomprehensibility of Edward Burtynsky's photographs of mined landscapes, or the planet Solaris viewed from the space station Prometheus.

The colour grey is one of contradiction; it can be a progression towards homogeneity, or a colour of complexity when it is the result of its multiple colour constituents. A mixed grey (not unadulterated black and white) is a colour beyond duality. In Western culture, grey may be associated with conformity, boredom and uncertainty. Writer, composer and filmmaker Trinh T. Min Hah writes that, according to architect and theorist Kisho Kurokawa, what is called Rikyu grey in Japan is a combination of four opposing colours, and is mid-way between emergence, possibility and entropy.¹⁹⁶ In the future, I will paint a series of complex grey paintings.

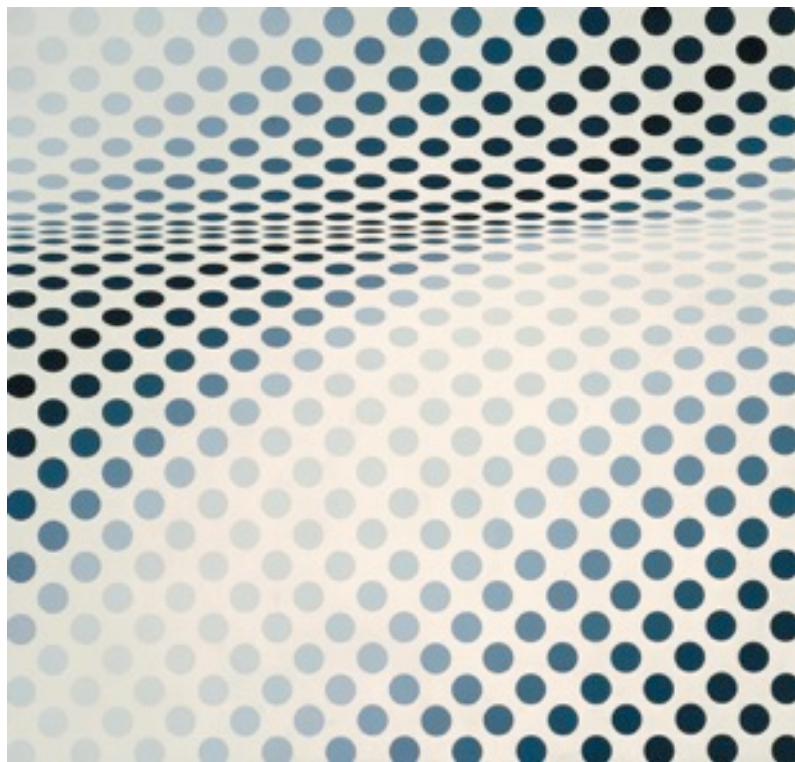


Fig. 49. Bridget Riley, *Hesitate*, 1964.
Emulsion on board, 106.7 x 112.4 cm. Tate Gallery, London.

¹⁹⁶ Trinh. T Min-ha, "Nature's R: A Musical Swoon," in *Futurenatural: Nature, Science, Culture*, ed. George Robertson (London; New York: Routledge, 1996).

2.8 The Shimmer

I corrupted the mixture of enamel paint and solvent by adding silver. Immiscible silver filaments were suspended in the concoction to register the turbulence of flow. These small particles produced a reflective pearlescence in areas of the paintings. Highlights flash and gleam, and react differently in different lights. This dispersal of light directs the viewer to move in front of the paintings in order to see the image in its entirety. The viewer is subject to the distortion and motility that the paintings display. Like Bridget Riley's optical paintings that register disorienting physical sensations in the viewer, I aim for this affect through arrhythmia and lack of symmetry.

Silver and white reflect light in the paintings, they hold the viewer on the picture plane and shimmer as we move in relation to the work. Sheen was produced in sections of oil paint where I used the method of working wet-into-wet. The sheen and shimmer were used to signify 'the formless'. Referring to the formless, James Elkins writes: "Nothing is secure and forms and figures vacillate or shimmer rather than oscillate in a regular motion."¹⁹⁷ Melissa Gregg registers 'affect' "as the continuous, shimmering gradations of intensities."¹⁹⁸ The shimmer creates movement and instability in the image, and it mimics life in inert material.

In alchemy, silver symbolised purification of the feminine element.¹⁹⁹ Silver reflects light in the paintings (Figs. 29, 40 and 45). In *Vibrant Matter*, Jane

¹⁹⁷ Elkins, *On Pictures and the Words That Fail Them*, 106.

¹⁹⁸ Ahmed, "Happy Objects", 11.

¹⁹⁹ Kerssenbrock-Krosigk et al, *Art and Alchemy*.

Bennett names metal as an exemplar of ‘vital materiality’ due to its conductive agency, its ‘quivering effervescence’.²⁰⁰ Vibrant matter shimmers and vibrates, it is a turbulent, immanent field and is ‘ontologically multiple’.²⁰¹

When I added white highlight, I created what James Elkins referred to as ‘the splendour’: the Western illusionistic trick that created light and lustre.²⁰² The splendour mimicked life and movement in material. Its non-naturalistic opposite is referred to by Elkins as the ‘anti-splendour’; it is illogical form that disturbs naturalistic goals.²⁰³ I worked with both illusionistic devices: one to create naturalistic illusion, and the other to destroy it. Rather than sit in opposition, they mutually configured each other to generate form and movement.

Also referred to as highlight, the splendour, or the gleam, ‘the shimmer’ creates movement and instability in the paintings.²⁰⁴ These highlights flash and gleam, reacting differently in varying light conditions. The dispersal of light worked against a singular gaze being located in one coherent viewer – it created instability of form. Bois and Krauss propose that the shimmer is a signifier of the formless.

²⁰⁰ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Elkins, *On Pictures and the Words That Fail Them*, 47-77.

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ In “Becoming Art: Exploring Cross-Cultural Categories,” Chapter 5 “Visuality and Representation in Yolngu Art,” anthropologist Howard Morphy hypothesises that the term bir’yun (brilliance) in the paintings of the Yolngu people of northern Australia is an autonomous formal and structural effect that operates cross-culturally. The Yolngu transform their paintings from a dull and rough state to a clearly defined bright state through the process of cross-hatching; it gives their images a shimmering appearance of movement and a sense of brightness. Bir’yun is an aesthetic property and a particular visual effect that refers to intense sources and refractions of light and operates independently from specific encoded meanings, it is a manifestation of Ancestral power emanating from the Ancestral past.

To conclude this chapter, I turn to the way in which tensions between polarities generated constant movement in the paintings. These tensions drove constant transformation and alteration of form but were not in argument. They existed in a relationship of reciprocity to spawn other elements.²⁰⁵ Figuration was elastic until it snapped into abstraction and back again. Sections of the paintings oscillated between macro and micro, inside and outside. My pictorial constructions favoured asymmetrical cropping and framing to reinforce movement that centred on continuous dissolution and recreation. Forms coalesced and dispersed to become partial and outlined:

*Shapes shifted to share attributes and exchange places as they metamorphosed into each other, suggesting the exchangeability or non-separation between objects: a transformational system where hair rhymed with brush and branch with bone. This was a historiography of form and its transformation. It was how form unravelled and altered itself.*²⁰⁶

Plasticity is therefore a theory of form and its transformation, “it confronts the deletion of stable demarcations.”²⁰⁷ Plasticity was manifested in my project through the operations of improvisation, addition and erasure. Improvisation was contingent on what occurred before an action, and it directed the actions that

²⁰⁵ This relationship of reciprocity resonates with the political theory of Agonism which implies a deep respect and concern for the other. The Greek agon refers to athletic contest which emphasises the importance of the struggle and the existence of the opponent. An agonistic discourse will be marked not only by conflict but by mutual admiration.

Samuel Chambers, "Language and Politics: Agonistic Discourse in the West Wing," *CTHEORY*, http://ctheory.net/ctheory_wp/language-and-politics-agonistic-discourse-in-the-west-wing/.

²⁰⁶ Walch, "The Rough Guide".

²⁰⁷ Dietmar Rübel, "Plasticity: An Art History of the Mutable," in *Materiality: Documents of Contemporary Art*, ed. Petra Lange-Berndt (Whitechapel Gallery, 2015).

occurred in response. This was neither a form of Surrealist automatism nor the impulsive gesture of Abstract Expressionism – these were separate realms in collision, expressing the tension between states that were associated with polar entities. But these two states were no longer separate or dualistic. The boundary between them was porous. The velocity of destruction and transformation was being depicted. The interplay between mutually configuring polarities generated tension and movement in the paintings to become increasingly destructive and anti-humanist as the torsion increased until forms were compromised and breached in the struggle.

Improvisation was a plastic operation. This was a shift in compositional development from pre-conception to one in which the nature of paint's physicality and dynamism became a collaborator. Paint was an active agent, and I orchestrated its performance; I was no longer the sole author of form. I was in a state of heightened receptiveness to possibilities that my rational mind could not predict. Orchestrating the dynamism of paint had de-centred my subjectivity; I was flirting with control and lack of control. My mastery of the medium may have been enhanced, as my capacity was increasing and expanding as a result of this process, but I experienced an increased responsiveness to the material. My tampering and interfering with emergent shapes in the paintings resulted in theatrical forms, which I discuss in relation to Mannerism in chapter three.

However, the consideration of materials as active agents is not new. In their discussion of 'New Materialism', Barbara Bolt and Estelle Barrett state that thinking through performative acts with materials can constitute a return to tacit

knowledge in resistance to an impersonalised logic of knowledge production.²⁰⁸

Metaphysical references become understandable through a tangible relationship in paintings as they are grounded in the visceral terms of the body. The increasingly violent contortion and mediation of form in space hints at the body's elimination.

I interfered with the emergent forms in the fluid matrices. I observed the interaction of fluid colour, the chemical performance of liquid paint and the macro/micro correspondences that occurred. Paint and its interactions can be metaphors for conditions outside of the frame. Conditions of mixing that preserve difference and contrast are optimal; when equivalence retains difference. I corrupted the viscosity of the painted medium by lowering and raising its thickness to examine conditions of fluidity and resistance to flow. Fluid paint could be inventive or uniform, generative or ruinous. The low viscosity of liquid enamel generated turbulent ether spaces that were in danger of becoming homogeneous. Without some contrast of texture, colour and form, definition dissolved. Distinct elements required some differentiation, without which they would overpower one another and thus progress towards entropy. With medium viscosity, only the colour edges collided – to merge and create a new neutralised colour. With high viscosity, enamel retained boundaries of form, and colour mixing did not occur; thick sticky paint resisted being altered or manipulated. High viscosity and resistance to flow is addressed in the next chapter, in which I account for the base, resistant and congealed characteristics of the painterly medium in form and content.

²⁰⁸ Barrett and Bolt, *Carnal Knowledge*.

Chapter Three

Viscosity and Mannerism

3.1 Introduction

In chapter two, I described the interplay between the fluid and performative aspects of painting in the *Spill Series*, as a negotiation with control and lack of control of the medium, manifest in spontaneous gesture and its mediation – the filtering of direct sense experience, and the point where this is fixed. In this chapter, to enlarge on the principle of opposing and mutually configuring forces in painting, I undertake to describe and analyse the properties of the medium that are counter to fluidity: the base and resistant aspects of paint; the slimy, unctuous, sticky, viscous materiality of it. Writing about the implications of *fixing* fluidity, Zygmunt Bauman declared: “Descriptions of fluids are all snapshots that require a date because they make us aware of the flow of time.”²⁰⁹

Fixing fluidity is a plastic operation that involves the interplay between mutually configuring polarities. Paintings arrest fluidity in still images, yet though paintings may instantly display their material information, they continue to inform and reveal their nuances. Ambiguity demands sustained attention and interpretation from the viewer, who is required to exert their perceptual agency in order to ‘complete’ the painting. The viewer is directed to move in front of the

²⁰⁹ Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, 1.

paintings and to interact with their surfaces, rather than being designated a single, optimal, or static position. In devising the works for this project, I rejected fixing a single viewing point for the paintings in order to extend upon their sense of provisionality and distortion. The aim was to develop an understanding of the position and relation of the viewer to the painting as was elaborated by Michel Foucault, particularly in his observations that cast Manet's paintings as precursors of modernism in their disrupting of the viewing of paintings.²¹⁰

One of the motivating questions behind this research project is: what role can painting play in relation to the increasing mediation and immateriality of images? Now that we are met with vast numbers of images from multiple sources, we process them rapidly in order to cope with the volume of visual information. Painting can capture and freeze movement from the constant barrage of ephemeral imagery that bombards us. Painting's historical and material concerns emphasise its separation from the ephemeral.

A number of contemporary commentators argue that the medium of painting can be a means of reflecting on, or critically resisting, the mobility of signs and signifiers. Paint can be used to register the transient subject before 'all that is solid melts into air'.²¹¹

In his essay accompanying the 2016 exhibition *Painting. More Painting* at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Justin Paton argues that "because it

²¹⁰ Foucault, *The Object of Painting*.

²¹¹ "All That Is Solid Melts into Air" is a text by Marshall Berman interpreting social and economic modernisation and its impact on modernism, published in New York City, 1982.

is old, slow, difficult, stubborn, marginal and ‘uncontemporary’, painting is well placed to express a sense of estrangement from and discontentment with some of the prevailing conditions of our time.”²¹² Similarly, the art historian Michael Yonan argues that the substantial dimension of paintings as objects has become a site of “resistance and recalcitrance” to dematerialisation in art. In his view, objects draw attention to their own resistance via their materiality in a way that digital images do not.²¹³

I concur with the idea that the objecthood of the painted work provides a point of resistance to disembodied and immaterial art forms, and in my studio experimentation I sought to demonstrate this by emphasising the base and viscous material properties of paint and their resistance to flow. In this chapter, I contextualise material and ontological instability and resistance to orthodox pictorial conventions in my work by addressing Georges Bataille’s theory of base materialism and Jean-Paul Sartre’s notion of viscosity. I also examine the mediation of form and gesture by referencing works by Roy Lichtenstein and by relating this mediation to historical Mannerism.

²¹² Paton, *Necessity and Glut*.

²¹³ Michael Yonan, "The Suppression of Materiality in Anglo-American Art-Historical Writing," *Academia.edu* (2012), https://www.academia.edu/8514035/The_Suppression_of_Materiality_in_Anglo-American_Art-Historical_Writing.

3.2 Viscosity

Viscosity dictates how fluid enamel paint will flow, mix or repel. It is a measure of a fluid's resistance to flow and liquefaction, defined as "the quality or fact of being viscous; viscosity. In scientific use, the tendency of a liquid or gas to resist by internal friction the relative motion of its molecules and hence any change of shape."²¹⁴ A fluid with high viscosity resists motion because its molecular composition creates internal friction. A fluid with low viscosity flows easily because its molecular structure results in very little friction when it is in motion. With low viscosity there is a progression towards liquefaction and homogeneity. With high viscosity, difference is still attenuated and form retains definition. In this project, viscosity connotes resistance to deformation. Viscosity sits between categories of form. Viscosity refers to a substance suspended between states, between solid and liquid. Jean-Paul Sartre's exploration of the ontological region of viscosity describes ambiguity and lack of equilibrium.²¹⁵

I harnessed a lack of equilibrium in the paintings through the interplay between oppositional complementary elements that I forced to co-exist: positive and negative space, reflective and absorptive, complementary colours, figuration and abstraction, subject and object, movement and stillness wrestle with one another, there is a stand-off – there is no happy ending. They agree to disagree.

²¹⁴ Oxford English Dictionary, "Viscosity, N."

²¹⁵ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, chapter 3.

This is agonism, where conflict is permanent, positive and productive. Agonism contributes to a critical sense of the awkward in these paintings. They are not conventionally harmonious paintings.

When I raised the viscosity of fluid enamel paint, it became resistant to being altered. It was difficult to manipulate. Paint stuck to the brush and it wouldn't easily flow or glide. It was a struggle to make paint conform to any prescribed shape. With high viscosity, colour and form retained their cohesion, and I observed what occurred at the edges of colliding contrasting colours. The vibrant unmixed enamels sat in a shallow pictorial space on the unblemished sign-writing surface. Thick enamel congealed to become chewy, elastic and textural. The images grew toxic, aggressive and flamboyant.

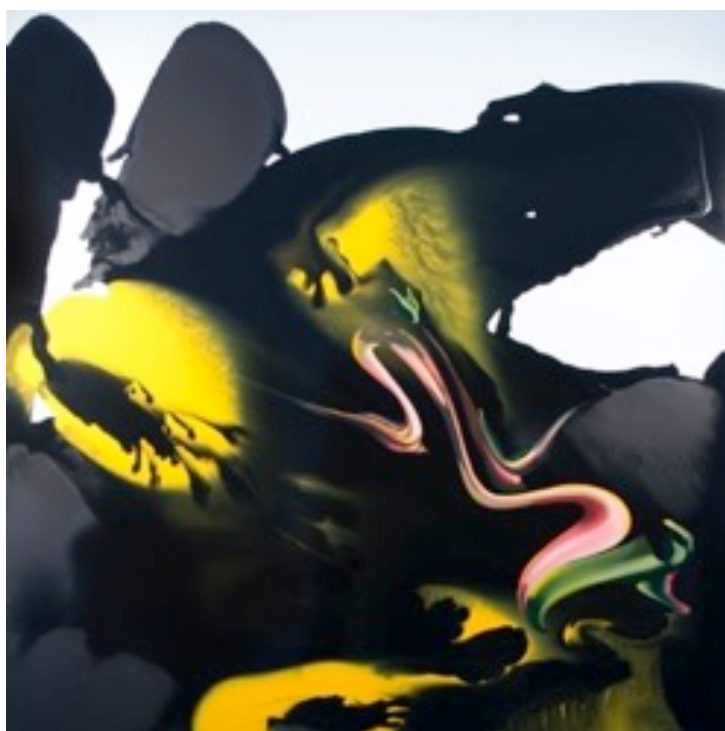


Fig. 50. Megan Walch, *The Spill Suite (Yellow versus Black)*, 2016.
Oil and enamel on composite panel, 150 x 150 cm. Collection of the artist.



Fig. 51. Man Ray, *L'explosant fixe*, 1934.
Gelatin silver print, 22.8 x 17.8 cm. Private collection, Paris.

In *The Spill Suite (Yellow versus Black)*, (Fig. 50), discordant colours appear to wrestle with one another in a white arena. Patches of cadmium yellow remain intact with black viscous blobs in their centres, like spot-lit characters on a stage. These calligraphic characters are animated in a polymorphous dance, like shadow puppets, or the tango dancer in Man Ray's 1934 photograph "*fixed explosive*" (Fig. 51). In *Yellow versus Black*, knuckly fingers grapple with pockets of vibrant yellow that fray into black to generate a lethal bloom of algal green, and which then dissolve into black and reform again. Distinct painterly edges melt to become porous and penetrable. A shiny pink prolapse, a *Rückenfigur*²¹⁶ unfurls from the lip of a yellow wave in the foreground. Internal constituents construct and reconstruct themselves, as if in a fight against themselves. There is a battle between colour opposites and an argument between matte black and gloss black. Yellow and black are perilous to mix successfully; they kill each other's chroma. Yellow and black signify danger in nature. The affects of these contrasting colour opposites generate a visual form of alert.

²¹⁶ The Rückenfigur, (literally back figure) was frequently used by Caspar David Friedrich as a device in painting where a person is seen from behind in the foreground of the image, contemplating the view before them, and is a means by which the viewer can identify with the figure and recreate the space to be conveyed.

Joseph Leo Koerner, *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape*, 1st Edition ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).



Fig. 52. Caspar David Friedrich, *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, 1818.
Oil on canvas, 98.4 x 74.8 cm. Kunsthalle Hamburg.

(*Yellow versus Black*) and “*fixed explosive*” (Figs. 50 and 51) both suspend movement in motion. They are the union of stillness and motion, of resistance and fluidity. Mobility is suspended and yet the image remains full of movement. The images freeze movement at the point at which the outcome is still unknown, generating a sense of suspense. They depict forms caught between states during a process of continual transformation. Fixed as fluid, they suggest movement that is constant and often quite rapid.

My successful paintings appear to mutate with each different encounter; the materials may have been fixed, but the viewer cannot sit with any one reading, as the paintings appear to continue to mutate. Tentativeness of form and pictorial instability need to be sustained for this to occur. If the viewer is given too much

information too quickly, they complete the image in their mind.

The completion of an impartial image in our minds relies on a psychological 'schema'. Schemas are like pre-existing templates for rapidly ordering, categorising and processing information. They are utilitarian, as we use them to quickly fill in visual gaps. They are a set of forms, rules and categories that are part of our unconscious coding and organising of experience.²¹⁷ Our preference is for perceiving harmony and order in schemas. I propose that our dynamic, complex world requires models for apprehending flux. Unstable and unharmonious visual categories often take longer to assimilate; they require interaction on the viewer's part and they are not aesthetically pleasurable.

Difficult paintings are high maintenance when attention spans are short and information is expected to be clear and delivered with speed. Justin Paton believes that painting must make "the stillness and singularity of the painting's surface count as never before."²¹⁸

In his article *Painting in Retrograde*, Brian Bishop states that the ubiquity and motility of images is now a given.²¹⁹ "But within this context," he writes, "painting could be the locus to fix the image, and a method to engage the other in a physical form that is both familiar and alien – a new twist on its agency of yore."²²⁰ Painting has a tradition on which to build, it is a familiar foundation

²¹⁷ Oxford English Dictionary, "Schema, N.", accessed 19 January, 2017, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/172307?redirectedFrom=schema>.

²¹⁸ Paton, *Necessity and Glut*.

²¹⁹ Brian Bishop, "Painting in Retrograde," *Big Red and Shiny*, no. June 16, 2014 (2014).

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

from which to explore our ‘liquid modernity’, it can be a tool for understanding the complexity of the lived experience, whilst training us to apprehend schemas for flux.



Fig. 53. Megan Walch, *The Spill Suite (Pink Fucks Black)*, 2016.
Oil, enamel and glitter on composite panel, 150 x 150 cm. Collection of the artist.



Fig. 54. Jacopo Pontormo, *Deposition from the Cross*, 1525-28.
Oil on panel, 313 x 192 cm. Santa Felicita church, Florence.

In *The Spill Suite (Pink Fucks Black)* (Fig. 53), pink wrestles with black in a kinetic interpenetration of pop and darkness. Stylised forms twist, stretch and interpenetrate like the exaggerated torsion of bodies in a Pontormo painting. Compressed slabs of sumo flesh release smoky wisps of manga. A gestural swipe morphs into an exhaust pipe that vents cadmium yellow. The forms and the palette are minimal, but strident and artificial, as in Pontormo's *Deposition from the Cross* (Fig. 54). In both paintings, synthetic colours coalesce from grey, and forms writhe in a shallow compressed pictorial space. The paintings suggest heightened drama and emotion. Draped turbulent forms disguise the paintings' rigorous diagonal construction. This rhythmic structure of interwoven diagonal lines in both works reinforces a feeling of transition and volatility. Diagonal

image construction avoids the stasis that can occur when the viewers' focus is trained on the centre of an image.

In *(Pink Fucks Black)*, volcanic matte coagulates around a textured puckered orifice. There are several punctures in the picture plane that pierce into the substrate – the impact crater of a golf ball or a small asteroid. There is an argument between matte and gloss, between reflective and absorptive. A small patch of textured black glitter slips off the frame to stress the asymmetry and motion of the composition. Matte black paint absorbs the light; it appears soft, velvety, organic and recessive. Gloss black is highly reflective, it works like a black mirror, and it suggests the machine-made. Gloss behaves like an extravert; it catches the viewer's reflection in the painting. It briefly captures the viewers' reflection to become part of the painting. Glitter behaves like an ostentatious diva – a siren of the picture plane. It sits on the surface and disguises imperfections in selected areas that have become corrupted. I use glitter to reinforce asymmetry in the picture by directing visual traffic in diagonal lines. Its sparkle and shimmer advances in space to pierce forward, and it gives the illusion that all other forms and textures are receding in space. Glitter became a part of my painterly vocabulary during my residencies in Taiwan in 2003 and Thailand in 2004. Sparkle appeared as an integral part of a popularist aesthetic vernacular. In Australia, sparkle is more likely to be found in automotive duco. Bois and Krauss speculate as to why Georges Bataille never made use of “the poisonous substance

of kitsch” in his “aim of levelling and bringing things down in the world.”²²¹



Fig. 55. Megan Walch, *The Spill Suite (Orange versus Black and Grey)*, 2016.
Oil and enamel on composite panel, 150 x 150 cm. Collection of the artist.

As I continued to explore the unstable aspects of fluidity, I swamped the substrate with a wave of enamel and solvent. Painted matter mimicked the turbulent eddies and vortices of conflicting tides and the foamy curlicues of “latte art”. In *The Spill Suite (Orange versus Black and Grey)* (Fig. 55), I used orange for algal bloom – red tide – and I poured viscous black to simulate oil spills. I mixed greys from colours by contamination: red, blue, yellow and white. I added black to kill the chroma of the other colours and flatten out the nuanced properties of the grey. Four ovoid patches reveal the unadulterated black gloss of the picture

²²¹ Bois and Krauss, *Formless*, 118.

plane, and they fleetingly catch my reflection to implicate me in the poisonous violence.



Fig. 56. Megan Walch, *The Spill Suite (Green and Orange versus Black)*, 2016.
Oil and enamel on composite panel, 150 x 150 cm. Collection of the artist.

The Spill Suite (Green and Orange versus Black) (Fig. 56) is a noxious Rorschach blot of black, lime green and orange. The poured enamel slick sits on the fragile white plastic coating of the substrate. The paint has formed a skin like the corrugated membrane on overheated cream, or the crusted magma from a lava-flow. Thick enamel has become rubbery and fetishistic. I contaminated and corrupted the enamel paint to make it a caricature of itself. Colour is toxic, like a

slick of fluid industrial waste. Two blank 'Toontown'²²² holes play the leading roles in the 'tangle' between figure and ground. Their equivalence generates a push-pull in shallow positive and negative space. Matte and gloss black collide in a frayed seam in the top right of the painting. Orange 'hot-rod' flames exit the bottom of the form. The painting is an extrovert; it flagrantly adopts an aggressive exterior that resembles rubber-wear.

There is a sense of flamboyance and consumerist greed in the *Spill Series*. Compressed minimal forms are placed in shallow pictorial spaces similar to the 'high pitched mannerism' of Roy Lichtenstein. The collision of forms and the indication of rapid motion are depicted in a cool, detached style. Lichtenstein flattened and stylised gestures to parody the abstraction of his expressionist predecessors. His subjects and their emotions were depicted as synthetic and exaggerated to such a degree that they became creepy, ironic and vacuous.²²³ This contrived jouissance hints at the dark side of the popular consumerist culture. Lichtenstein confronted the spectacle of media and commerce as represented by commodified pictures, and questioned how mechanical reproduction has influenced the standardisation of data and the way that we perceive the world.²²⁴ His was a painting position developed in relation to the mediation of images. Lichtenstein declared Pop art to be "an involvement with what I think to be the

²²² Toontown is a themed land at Disneyland operated by The Walt Disney Company. The word was inspired by 1988 film "Who Framed Roger Rabbit" where cartoons live separately from humans.

²²³ Robert Rosenblum, "Bomb Magazine — John Currin by Robert Rosenblum," <http://bombmagazine.org/article/2297/john-currin>.

²²⁴ Roy Lichtenstein et al., "Roy Lichtenstein: All About Art," (Humblebaek, Denmark: Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, 2003).

most brazen and threatening characteristics of our culture.”²²⁵



Fig. 57. Roy Lichtenstein, *Yellow and Green Brushstrokes*, 1966.
Oil and Magna on canvas, 213.4 x 457.2 cm. Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt.

The implication of energy, collision and impact in Lichtenstein’s painting *Yellow and Green Brushstrokes* (Fig. 57) is revisited in my painting *Extreme Ikebana*, in which figures stretch, twist and snap like chewing gum. In both works, artificial ejaculations of fluid paint splatter onto the picture plane. There is the implication of force and speed that reinforces a sense of spectacle; there is an arch sense of struggle.

²²⁵ John Russell, Suzi Gablik, and Hayward Gallery., *Pop Art Redefined* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1969), 92.

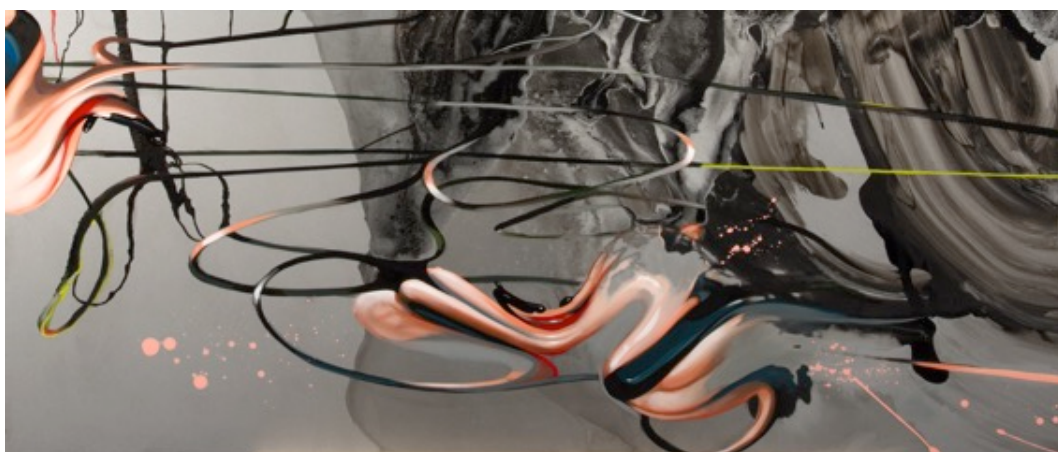


Fig. 58. Megan Walch, *Extreme Ikebana*, detail, 2014.
Oil and enamel on composite panel, 130 x 130 cm. Private collection.

The use of expressive gesture in current painting was presented in the 2016 exhibition *Painting 2.0* at the Museum Brandhorst in Munich. Gesture is examined as a means of reintegrating the virtual world of the information age into the material domain of the human body, and the catalogue accompanying the exhibition examines ways in which gestural techniques were mobilised to combat or ‘humanise’ spectacle.²²⁶ The exhibition presented works in which the painterly mark and gesture are used as means to assault and undermine spectacular forms of commercial media.²²⁷ The exhibition proposes that ‘eccentric figuration’ has embodied corporeality through a play with mimesis and visceral abstraction in the material of paint, and through the complex entanglement of body, media images and new technologies since the mid Twentieth Century.²²⁸

²²⁶ Achim Hochdörfer et al., *Painting 2.0* (Museum Brandhorst, 2016), Exhibition Catalogue, 15-27.

²²⁷ Ibid.

²²⁸ Ibid., 85-101.

Eccentric abstraction does not refer to eccentric subject matter, but rather to the appeal and repulsion and sensuous ‘affect’ related to a contemporary concept of body.²²⁹ In response to the first wave of the internet as a mass medium, painters Sue Williams and Inka Essenhigh transform a sense of corporeality in their paintings. Sue Williams dissolves clear distinctions between inside/outside, repulsion/attraction, figuration and abstraction as she immerses individual figures in a calligraphic collective.²³⁰



Fig. 59. Sue Williams, *Empathy Displacement/Loopy in Blue and Orange*, 1997.
Oil and acrylic on canvas, 163 x 183 cm. Art Institute of Chicago.

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ Ibid., 97.

As Essenhigh says, “her paintings of the late ‘90s and early 2000s were presenting new technology as a natural phenomenon that wouldn’t be able to be controlled. It was the new natural landscape.”²³¹

Her hybrid human mutations convulse against vivid blocks of shiny enamel colour. Her ‘Cronenberg’ characters are organic *and* manufactured, they populate dystopia. There is a mannered torsion to her figures, and elements of struggle and turmoil that conjure up the exaggerated force of manga.²³²



Fig. 60. Inka Essenhigh, *Supergod*, 2001.
Oil and enamel on canvas, 183 x 188 cm. Saatchi Gallery Collection.

²³¹ Personal correspondence with Inka Essenhigh. Instant Messenger. October 30th 2017

²³² During a studio visit, Inka Essenhigh said she used automatic drawing techniques to render fine calligraphic forms that were not pre-meditated (Williamsburg, Brooklyn. 2000).



Fig. 61. Inka Essenhigh, *Reconstruction*, 2000.
Oil on canvas, 203.2 x 228.6 cm. Location unknown.

As with the paintings of Lichtenstein and Essenhigh, what first appears to be an unstable pictorial space in the *Spill Series* has been devised in a deliberate way. As with numerous Mannerist paintings, diagonal pictorial constructions emphasise the erratic, the unsteady and the volatile.

In *The Spill Series*, forms are animated like costumed characters in a dark ballet. These paintings appear theatrical, their colour and contrast is high key, they are assertive, and they are not benign. My painted characters are contained within the edge of the frame, and they reference the physicality and scale of the body. Their tonal complexity creates a narrative arc, which teeters between figuration and abstraction in an effort to resist progressing too far with anthropomorphism – recognition slips and is denied.

There is a queering of the gesture into a type of reflective mannerism depicting everything in general, but highly orchestrated so as not to refer to

anything outside of a hermetically sealed space within the confines of the painting. My exaggerated, exerted, stylised forms are simplified in a 'Pop' reference or painterly cosplay.²³³

I used unmixed opaque colours in this suite of paintings. I selected discordant colours that are perilous to mix because they easily corrupt each other; they threaten to cancel each other's chromatic integrity.

The enamel was thick, slick, 'Pop' and plastic in reference to the contaminated and the industrial. I increased the viscosity of the enamel paint so that the colours did not easily disperse: they maintained their chromatic integrity to operate as an index of resistance to mixing. Chemically, things don't always mix, and there is a resistance to amalgamation. I corrupted enamel paint to become elastic. High viscosity offers resistance to liquefaction and constitutes a foreclosure on fluidity. Viscosity increased as fluid paint became tacky and developed a resistance to being altered. Viscous paint cannot be sanded or easily abraded. Congelation is the process by which something congeals or thickens. James Elkins states that the alchemists saw the act of 'congelation' as a violent process: "Imagination is fluid, or it wants to be, and the very act of painting is an act of violence against the liquidity of our thoughts."²³⁴

²³³ Originating in Japan, 'cosplay' is the action or pastime of dressing up in costume, especially as a character from anime, manga or video games.

Oxford English Dictionary, "Cosplay, N.", accessed 19 January, 2017, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/271924?redirectedFrom=cosplay>.

²³⁴ Elkins, *What Painting Is*, 124.

As an index of high viscosity and repulsion, I began to use latex as a fluid mask. I dripped fluid rubber on the surface and proceeded to paint over the resulting patches. Once the enamel paint had congealed, I peeled the latex patches off to reveal the unblemished substrate. These small windows pierce the picture plane, creating a *punctum* in the painting through which negative space becomes positive. These windows create a shallow space where depth is signalled and yet conflated. The reading of space in the paintings flips between positive and negative. They are equivalent.

I cast fluid enamel onto neutral substrates of pale grey and white. The untouched surface of the substrate is a fragile manufactured skin. The contrast between the organic enamel spill and the unblemished substrate rendered fluid paint as a calligraphic character. The substrate references a machine-made space, rather than an organic one; its sheen and shimmer reinforce this synthetic nature. There is a collision and synthesis of elements on this artificial surface. The conflation of forms on the picture plane compresses space. My gestures and brushstrokes are dramatic and appear synthetic in quality; they have a mechanical overtone. They appear like signs for gestures and brushstrokes, standing in for the real thing. This mediation and filtering of gesture contributes to a sense of mannerism.



Fig. 62. Rosso Fiorentino, *Deposition from the Cross*, 1521.
Oil on wood, 375 x 196 cm. Pinacoteca Comunale, Volterra, Italy.



Fig. 63. Installation view: *The Spill* at Contemporary Art Tasmania, September 2016.
Photograph Megan Walch.

My paintings privilege distortion and alteration of form, they are my rebellion against a space that is predictable, rational and conventionally harmonious. They are mannerist paintings in that they privilege exaggeration, theatrical lighting and artificial colour in shallow dramatic pictorial spaces that resemble a stage, within which the painter and the characters perform. They seem to express a heightened sense of existence. Multiple angles, displacements and inverted viewpoints replace simple linear constructions of space with the aim of presenting a space that interferes with our sense of balance, cohesion and equanimity. As with the historical project of Mannerism, I am dabbling with fiction to incorporate something of the bizarre and grotesque in painting.



Fig. 64. Megan Walch, *The Spill Series (Eschatalogue I)*, 2016.
Oil, enamel and glitter on composite panel 150 x 150 cm. Artemesia collection.

Eschatalogue 1 (Fig. 64) was generated by pouring fluid contrasting colours: fluid teal and orange combined in the centre of the painting to create a vaporous neutralised brown and a recessive celestial space. Orange retained its intensity on the left side of the painting; this accentuated bloom of warm, salient colour conjures apocalyptic poisonous flows. I improvised on top of this space with an observed section of crumpled duct-tape. I used the tape to model a buckled and compressed space that also resembled drapery. There is a twisting and contorting of plasticised fabric, akin to the torsion applied to Mannerist figures. There is a heightened sense of drama similar to historical Mannerism, which rejected rationality in favour of abstracting and stylising forms in order to express the rhythmic, the subjective, and the transcendent in paintings.²³⁵

²³⁵ Friedlaender, *Mannerism and Anti-Mannerism*.



Fig. 65. Megan Walch. *The Spill Series (Eschatalogue I)*, detail, 2016.
Oil, enamel and glitter on composite panel, 150 x 150 cm.

To even out matte and gloss patches in *Eschatalogue I*, I sprayed a thick gloss coat on the surface and sprinkled fine trails of purple glitter. The surface became reflective, like automotive duco. This felt naughty, kitsch and popularist, like album cover art or an airbrushed scene on a panel van. This draws me back to Lichtenstein's thoughts on Mannerism and resistance: he considered that his subjects would be antithetical to serious modernism; he was resisting the dominant style and ideology.²³⁶ My own rebellious tendencies in resistance to 'high art' are my fondness for cosmic ether-spaces, Dr Seuss illustrations and Roger Dean album covers. I have used glitter and resin in service of attraction and repulsion in my paintings. There is also a futuristic quality to the paintings that

²³⁶ Lichtenstein et al, "All About Art".

borders on a sci-fi aesthetic. I am reminded of James Elkin's proposition that when we begin to pursue disorder in pictures the images tend to suggest apocalyptic or creation scenarios.²³⁷

3.3 Mannerism

***Mannerism, n.** The adoption, to a pronounced or (according to some writers) excessive degree, of a distinctive style, manner, or method of treatment, esp. in art and literature. In spec. use (usu. Mannerism): a style of 16th-cent. Italian art characterised by stylistic exaggeration, distorted scale and perspective, and unusual effects of colour and lighting.*²³⁸

The historical project of Italian Mannerism (1530–1590) was characterised by a reaction to the harmonious classical conventions and the ideal of naturalness that was promoted during the High Renaissance that immediately preceded it.²³⁹ Italian court painters responded to the limits and proscriptions of Classical ideology and transformed pictorial conventions within the rules derived from Classical art, displaying their ability to resolve difficult artistic problems.²⁴⁰ Mannerist painting was considered self-conscious, 'anti-natural' and anti-conservative.²⁴¹

The word 'mannerism' comes from the Italian '*maniera*', which refers to

²³⁷ Elkins, *On Pictures and the Words That Fail Them*.

²³⁸ Oxford English Dictionary, "Mannerism, N."

²³⁹ Friedlaender, *Mannerism and Anti-Mannerism*.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ Maria Rika Maniates, *Mannerism in Italian Music and Culture, 1530-1630* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979).

the unique stylistic characteristics of an artist, especially the exaggerated style of a Mannerist.²⁴² The word ‘manner’ comes from the Latin ‘*manus*’ and ‘*manuarius*’: of or pertaining to the hand, easy to handle.²⁴³ My paintings for this project are made by hand, and the work embodies physical actions and their mediation. Paintings are a register of the maker’s hand and idiosyncrasy; paintings can be read as traces of the person.²⁴⁴ Manner relates to the ‘how’ of process. Melissa Gregg claims that the engagement of ‘affect’ is more a matter of ‘manner’ than of essence, and that the influence of ‘affect’ as a matter of *how* rather than *what* has a political dimension.²⁴⁵

Process indicates the *way* that a painting is made. The words ‘how’ and ‘way’ imply the verbs and actions that lead the evolution of a painting as distinct from the pursuit of a pre-determined end result. My paintings progress through a syntax of operations and processes. The paintings become a trace of these physical gestures. The processes of spilling, pouring, tilting, sanding, dissolving and rubbing were used to generate all of the paintings in the visual thesis, but these techniques are particularly evident in *Satellitescape* (Fig. 29)

The fluid matrices dictate which direction my improvisations will take.

²⁴² Oxford English Dictionary, "Maniera, N.", accessed 19 January, 2017, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/244764?redirectedFrom=maniera>.

²⁴³ Oxford English Dictionary, "Manner, N. (and Int.)", accessed 19 January, 2017, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/113569?redirectedFrom=manner>.

²⁴⁴ Isabelle Graw, Daniel Birnbaum, and Nikolaus Hirsch, *Thinking through Painting: Reflexivity and Agency Beyond the Canvas* (Institut für Kunstkritik, Frankfurt am Main: Sternberg Press, 2012).

²⁴⁵ Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, "An Inventory of Shimmers," in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2010).

They are a result of emergent forms in the image and are not *a priori*. With *Satellitescape*, the resolution or ‘closure’ of the image occurred early on.²⁴⁶ The cool, naturalistic aquatic colour created spatial recession, and the process of sanding the enamel paint created organic forms that resembled the water seen from above the surface of the earth, or seen from below the surface of the sea. This painting is less complex as a result. It is not as ambiguous as the others. There is more than one possible reading, but these readings are confined within a familiar range of possibilities.

I consider the most successful paintings to be the ones in which ‘tentativeness of form’ is sustained the longest, in which the image continues to teeter precariously between contrasting properties, and the interplay between equivalences co-exist in the work: positive and negative, attraction and repulsion, matte and gloss, clashing colour, figuration and abstraction.

²⁴⁶ In Gestalt psychology, closure is the process whereby incomplete forms, situations, etc., are completed subjectively by the viewer or seem to complete themselves; the tendency to create ordered and satisfying wholes.

Oxford English Dictionary, "Closure, N."



Fig. 66. Megan Walch, *The Spill Series (Satellitescape)*, 2015.
Oil, enamel and glitter on composite panel, 150 x 150 cm. Collection of the artist.

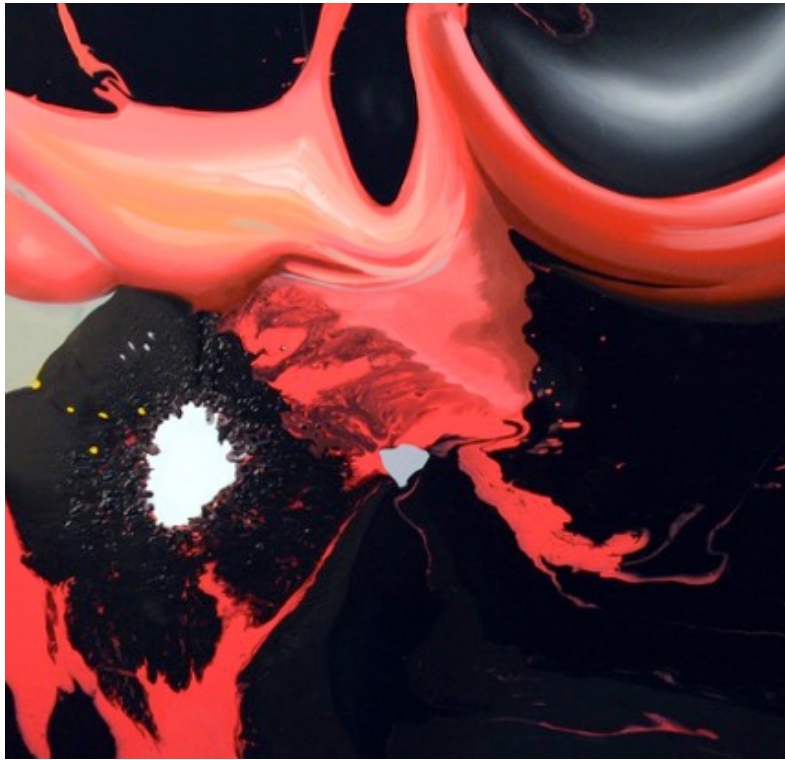


Fig. 67. Megan Walch, *The Spill Suite (Pink Fucks Black)*, detail, 2016. Oil, enamel and glitter on composite panel, 150 x 150 cm. Collection of the artist.

Viscosity is slimy. My project acknowledges the base qualities of the painted medium. In *The Spill Suite (Pink Fucks Black)* (Fig. 53), slippery, lurid body parts coalesce around thick black sphincters of puckered paint that penetrate a white void below the picture plane. The oscillation between compelling and repelling, between lush lustre and the contamination of colour generates flux and disequilibrium in the painting. Base materialism, as described by Georges Bataille in the 1920s, was a resistance against classical materialism and its attendant idealism and it provided a foundation for Surrealism.²⁴⁷ Base matter is that which is low and vulgar, and yet it supports that which is high or ideal; it acts as a kind

²⁴⁷ Bois and Krauss, *Formless*, 53.

of irritant, an internal friction by which sabotage occurs within the rules of the game being played.²⁴⁸ This is like working within the conventions of painting to alter, disrupt and transform them; I am innovating within the tradition of painting and using its conventions against itself. Painting has a tradition upon which to extend, it provides me with a familiar platform from which to encounter unfamiliar territory. As a keen traveller, I want paintings to take me somewhere that I have never been before.

Inchoate and ambiguous forms populate this unfamiliar territory. They vacillate between figuration and abstraction, sensuality and disgust. By harnessing the unpredictable fluidity of the medium to generate form upon which I would improvise, I allowed illogical and playful processes to generate images. These images were amorphous, indeterminate and uncertain. The Dadaists and Surrealists established that chance and irrationality were legitimate processes to be used in art making. I agree with William Kentridge when he declares that absurdity and uncertainty are essential categories of experience and therefore cannot be neglected in art.²⁴⁹

Georges Bataille developed base materialism and 'heterology', "the science of the radically other, of waste, of scrap material or the immaterial, of the shapeless..."²⁵⁰ Base matter undermines hierarchies, it declassifies, destabilises

²⁴⁸ Noys, "Base Materialism", 499-517.

²⁴⁹ Charles Atlas and Susan Sollins, "William Kentridge: Anything Is Possible," (PBS, 2010).

²⁵⁰ Foucault, *The Object of Painting*, 18.

and liberates matter from 'ontological prisons' to escape systematisation.²⁵¹ Benjamin Noys states that thinking of base matter as general instability has revolutionary effects.²⁵² The *informe* is a concrete manifestation of base materialism, and it provides a foundation for the discussion of the *informe* or formless by Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss. Inspired by the writings of Georges Bataille, Bois and Krauss proposed that formlessness constitutes a neglected but central category within Twentieth Century art.²⁵³

Georges Bataille's theory of base materialism and heterology, and its concrete manifestation in the *informe*, finds a correspondence with Ryûsei Kishida, whose project was to raise what he considered to be vulgar and dishonourable materials as subjects for painting and for personal transformation.

3.4 Mud and Jelly and Base Materialism

An exhibition titled *Mud and Jelly*, curated by Ms Mika Kuraya at the National Museum of Modern Art in Tokyo, between 21 January and 6 April 2014, presented 30 works from the museum's collection, including by Gutai artist Kazuo Shiraga (1924– 2008) and artist and historian Ryûsei Kishida (1821–1929). The exhibition focused on the base and viscous qualities of the painted medium. The catalogue reads:

²⁵¹ Ibid.

²⁵² Noys, "Base Materialism", 499-517.

²⁵³ Bois and Krauss, *Formless*.

*Regardless of culture or era, people basically enjoy mixing up sticky things. What kinds of possibilities arise when this pleasure is addressed in the context of painting, a medium that generally requires that we suppress our sense of touch and concentrate on seeing? Paint is a wondrous thing. Despite being sticky and gooey, it changes into different colors and shapes, and can be used to create human forms and landscapes on canvas.*²⁵⁴

The curator posed the question: “What would happen if you intentionally tried to accentuate the sticky aspect of painting?”²⁵⁵



Fig. 68. Ryūsei Kishida, *Road Cut through a Hill*, 1915.
Oil on canvas, 53 x 56 cm. The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo.

²⁵⁴ Kuraya.

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

In a number of Ryûsei Kishida's drawings, and in his famous painting *Road Cut through a Hill*, mud is used to connote humanity in a primordial, pre-formed state. Kishida's short story *Muddy Road* is analysed as "an artist's challenge to elevate base materials, such as mud and faeces, into art."²⁵⁶ In 1927, Kishida invented the word '*derori*', which vaguely translates as a repellent but compelling sensuality that has overtones of the abject.²⁵⁷ Sandy Kita explains that *derori* was never defined because its "onomatopoetic sound refers to the glutinous stickiness of certain semi-liquid foods, darkness and decadence are evoked by the term."²⁵⁸ *Derori's* ontological slipperiness occupies a position between stable categories; it echoes the formless, the foundational-fount, and affect's refusal to be defined and slotted into neat conceptual compartments.

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

²⁵⁷ Kita, *The Last Tosa*, 58.

²⁵⁸ Ibid.



Fig. 69. Ryûsei Kishida, *The Earth*, c. 1915.
Ink on paper, 12.6 x 12.6 cm. The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo.

I refer to Jean-Paul Sartre's exploration of the ontological region of viscosity as one of ambiguity and lack of equilibrium.²⁵⁹ The liquid aspect of paint in which pigment is suspended is referred to as a 'medium', defined as "something which is intermediate between two degrees, amounts, qualities, or classes; a middle state. An intermediate agency, instrument, or channel; a means; *esp.* a means or channel of communication or expression."²⁶⁰ Painted mediums are sticky; they range in viscosity from liquid to glutinous. Mediums are a vehicle for

²⁵⁹ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, chapter 3.

²⁶⁰ Oxford English Dictionary, "Medium, N. and Adj."

expression and the suspension of pigment. They can lose chromatic intensity to become transparent. According to their viscosity, mediums perform different tasks in painting. Colours suspended in a medium coalesce or separate depending on their viscosity. Medium can also mean ‘mid-way’ or ‘between states’, and in this project viscosity connotes conditions of in-betweenness.

3.5 Viscosity and Between-ness

Viscosity is a condition between fluid and solid, it is unstable and has the potential to challenge conventional categories of form. A seminal discussion of viscosity occurs in Jean-Paul Sartre’s existentialist work *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*. Sartre explores the ontological region of ‘*visqueux*’, the ‘slimy’, as one of ambiguity and lack of equilibrium.²⁶¹ It is a combination of physical and moral, masculine and feminine, continuous and discontinuous, fluid and solid.²⁶² Sartre writes that viscosity and, by implication, stickiness, is a threat to our subjectivity due to its in-betweenness.²⁶³ He declares that there is an added threat inherent in the ‘slimy’, because we cannot possess it, and this causes us to lose our mastery over our environment and ourselves.²⁶⁴ Zygmunt Bauman asserts that “the steadfastness, sticky, viscosity of things inanimate and animate alike are the most sinister and terminal of dangers, sources

²⁶¹ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*.

²⁶² Ibid.

²⁶³ Ibid.

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

of the most frightening of fears and the targets of the most violent of assaults.”²⁶⁵ Sara Ahmed’s essay on affect offers an approach to thinking through affect as ‘sticky’. She writes that “affect is what sticks, or what sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values and objects.”²⁶⁶ Melissa Gregg uses descriptors such as ‘stretchy’, ‘processual’, ‘*informe*’ and ‘sticky’ to describe affect’s kinetic undulating intensities in which there is no stable ground and only lateral movement between things.²⁶⁷

Bauman proposes that ‘stickiness’ is a threat to the ephemeral status quo encouraged by a ‘liquid modernity’, and that the utopian fiction of neo-capitalism is preserved by continuous exchange.²⁶⁸ Dietmar Rübel claims that “the artistic use of unstable things and materials that are ephemeral and formless represents the attempt to react to the fast pace of industrial societies.”²⁶⁹ Mutability, ambiguity and unpredictability are counter to the classical pictorial convention based on Greek models and ideals. The Surrealists questioned these Eurocentric attitudes and ideals. They sought to subvert the stranglehold that logic and rationalism had on culture. In his book *The Absence of Myth: Writings on Surrealism*, Georges Bataille says: “The Surrealists made revolt a moral value, calling themselves ‘specialists in revolt’.” He goes on to say that “the profound sense of Surrealism lay in the fact that it recognised the falsity of rationalism’s

²⁶⁵ Bauman, *Liquid Life*, 3.

²⁶⁶ Happy Objects. Sara Ahmed in Gregg, Melissa, and Gregory J. Seigworth. *The Affect Theory Reader*. Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2010. page 29.

²⁶⁷ Gregg and Seigworth, "An Inventory of Shimmers".

²⁶⁸ Bauman, *Liquid Life*.

²⁶⁹ Rübel, *Plasticity*.

ideological claims to define what is ‘real’.²⁷⁰ Surrealism opened painting to heterogeneity – to eccentric global traditions.



Fig. 70. Soga Shohaku, *Immortals*, detail from right screen, c. 1760.
Ink and colour on paper. Important Cultural Property.
Agency for Cultural Affairs, Tokyo.

3.6 *The Lineage of Eccentricity*

The original entry point to this project was the book *The Lineage of Eccentricity*, in which art historian Professor Nobuo Tsuji identified a particular school of Japanese mannerism. This lineage was characterised by the paintings of a select group of Edo Taoist eccentrics and hermits who mischievously flouted cultural conventions. Their work combined a sense of the playful with the grotesque.

²⁷⁰ Georges Bataille and Michael Richardson, *The Absence of Myth: Writings on Surrealism* (London: Verso, 2006), 15.

Their forms were sinuous and surreal, and they possessed a great love of nature. They used fluid lines to guide the viewer through the image as an alternative to linear perspective. I saw this lineage as a fitting context for painting the unorthodox beauty of the Tasmanian landscape, located as it is at the periphery of the globe. In my interview with Professor Tsuji, he explained that the impetus for his research was Professor James Francis Cahill's ongoing comparison of Chinese eccentric painting with European Surrealism.²⁷¹

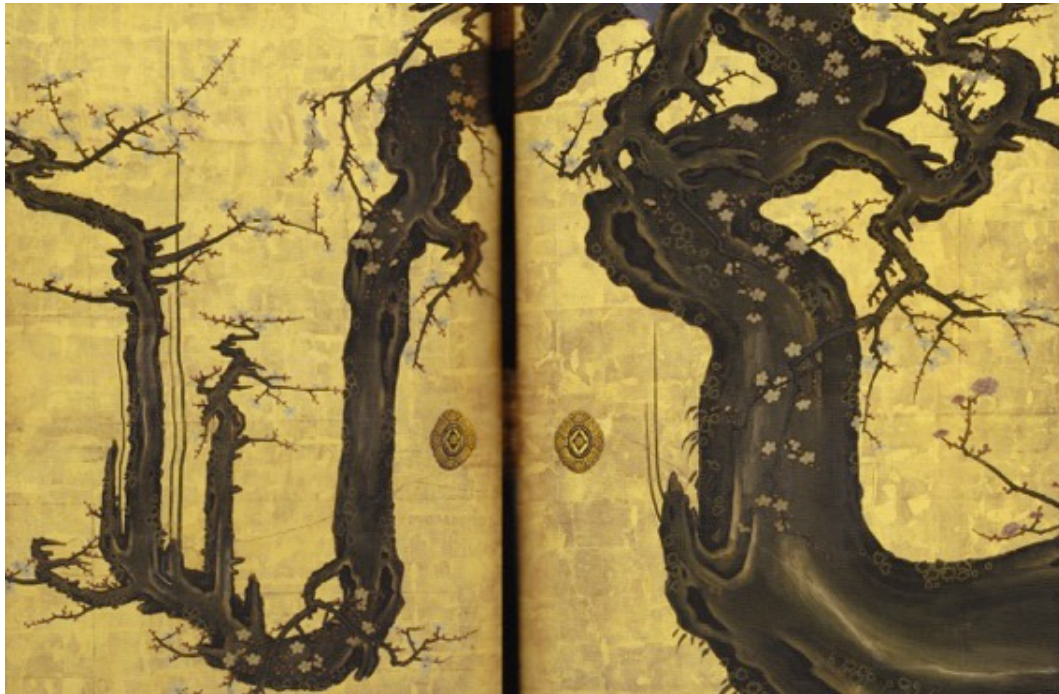


Fig. 71. Kano Sansetsu, *The Old Plum*, detail, 1646.
Ink, colour, gold, and gold leaf on paper, 174.6 x 485.5 cm.
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

The work of the Japanese lineage of eccentrics was a resistance to dominant pictorial conventions in Japan at the time.

²⁷¹ Interview, Kamakura Japan February 2014.

In conclusion, viscosity constitutes a resistance to fluidity within the confines of this project. It is a base aspect of painterly material that is tactile and resistant to immateriality. Viscosity resists deformation because of its internal friction.

It inhabits the ontological region of instability and between-ness. Viscosity's unctuous materiality connotes base physical properties and the tactility of the painted medium. I align this with our sense of touch and with an embodied experience of the world. I draw a parallel with viscosity and Georges Bataille's theory of base materialism, which destabilises orthodox hierarchies attached to materials and ideas. In this project, viscosity connotes flux and resistance in a sensual and pictorial sense.

I harnessed a lack of equilibrium in the paintings through the interplay of disparate formal and pictorial elements: matte/gloss, figuration/abstraction, positive space/negative space, control/spontaneity, reflective/absorptive, organic form/synthetic form, fluid form/congealed form, repulsion/attraction. I forced distinct and opposing elements to co-exist. The struggle between these forces generated pictorial turbulence and a sense of transition. Sustaining this impression of volatility contributed to the success or failure of the paintings.

Pictorial instability was cultivated in historical Mannerism to negate the orthodoxy of Classicist equilibrium in favour of expressiveness. Mannerism was one form of resistance to the formulated standards of Classicism.²⁷² My

²⁷² Friedlaender, *Mannerism and Anti-Mannerism*.

improvisation with emergent forms in the paintings generated a heightened sense of emotion in mannered forms, but the gestures and expressions were stylised and refined. These mannered forms evoke an embodied form of expression in reference to the filtering and mediation of images.

Conclusion

As I near the end of my candidature, the thematics of my thesis are echoed in some significant initiatives.

Stephanie Rosenthal, curator of the 20th Biennale of Sydney *The future is already here – it's just not evenly distributed*, highlights the uneven distribution of information and resources as a result of geopolitics and economic power structures.²⁷³ The global topography might be ever more networked and connected, but it is still uneven due to varying volumes of traffic. There are no conduits in areas where cultural and economic barriers are in place. This global condition might be characterised as a resistance to fluidity.

The email notification for the public seminar at the Geneva University of Art and Design titled 'Turbulences', January 2017, stated the need to develop "new vocabularies for living in global turbulences". The announcement reads:

The condition of turbulences creates a situation in which knowledge and non-knowledge exist together. In a condition of turbulence, on one side, we can rely on knowledge about science, history, rituals, regulations and systems that seem to secure our place in the world. On the other side, the moment of turbulence carries the condition of non-knowledge, in which it is not clear exactly what will happen next: language is missing, borders are closed, translation is needed,

²⁷³ Stephanie Rosenthal, "The Future Is Already Here-It's Just Not Evenly Distributed," (20th Biennale of Sydney catalogue 2016), 48.

*the mind is closer to the body, control mechanisms and systems fail, dominant histories unravel and collaborative thinking is important. It is a moment of a relational uncertainty that holds the potential to open up a new horizon.*²⁷⁴

The protean and contingent nature of the painted medium provides me with a vocabulary for visualising conditions of turbulence. These are spaces of ‘otherness’ – heterotopias – in which the horizon is no longer stable or outside; it is enfolded, interior and emergent. Operations are lateral, plastic, uncertain and collaborative. There is balance between the articulate and inarticulate aspects of the painted medium. The surface is at once fragile and robust, absorptive and reflective.

In experimenting with the picture plane, I employed horizontal and lateral modalities to harness the unpredictable and contingent material properties of fluid paint, and the result is a folded spatial matrix. Branches and drapery further articulated these buckled and involuted organising structures. This suite of paintings expressed a humanistic anxiety amidst transitional and brutal forces; there is elation at the possibility for transformation.

The relationship between control and lack of control, between interference and lack thereof, which I accomplished through the operation of improvisation, required a heightened responsiveness to the material. I discovered that the operation of improvisation in painting is ‘a branching method’ (in contrast to a

²⁷⁴ Art&Education, e-mail message to author, November 21, 2016.

<https://head.hesge.ch/ccc/turbulence/en/navigating-turbulences/> (Accessed 21 November 2016)

linear one), which resulted in mannered forms that are a visual conclusion to the research. These stylised forms have a synthetic quality, for they materialise spontaneous and automatic processes combined with manipulation and control. The synthesis of unfettered action and mediation or filtering manifested as mannered style and a sense of the awkward. The works are evidence of compression and distortion as a result of systemic strain. Forms mutate, rupture, and evacuate their soft contents.

The paintings make contradictory elements complementary by forcing them to collide and then work together in a shallow pictorial space. A sense of agitation and lack of equilibrium results from the uneven interaction between contrasting pictorial elements of fluidity and their suspension. Beyond the formal conclusion of the project, my studio practice will continue to explore the interplay between oppositional forces in paintings. Colour and form will become increasingly transparent whilst retaining chromatic integrity. I will increasingly expunge black to explore reflective materials that distort the viewer like funhouse mirrors. A future consideration for the orientation of the paintings is to hang them perpendicular to the viewer, who will be located beneath them.

Energy and mutation became subjects for the paintings, and were contextualised through a synthesis of approaches and philosophies of form. Improvisation is a plastic operation that unites polarities and contradictory elements; the relationship between contrasting forces generated movement in the paintings and suggests equivalence between opposing tendencies. Improvisation with the agencies of painted material, the environment, and my embodied action

produced outcomes that were emergent rather than predicted in advance. When painter, material and environment were considered to be collaborators in the production of paintings, this reciprocal interplay altered my subjectivity. I align this alteration with a return to familiar traditions in which hands-on making and the manipulation of materials constitute a different kind of knowing. When matter was imbued with agency, the boundary between maker and material blurred. The centrality of my subjectivity was shifted to the side. This de-centring occurred in tandem with image construction: diagonal composition was essential to creating a sense of transition in the images, whereas emphasis on the centre of the painting contributed to pictorial stasis. The paintings privilege diagonal image construction in compressed pictorial spaces, which heightens the feeling of drama in them. I align this pictorial theatricality with historical Mannerism, in which pictorial instability intensified emotion in resistance to rational representations based on harmonious structure.

The compression of layers in the paintings expressed principles of equivalence, the absence of difference – empty space became full space and vice versa. The compression of layers and acts of erasure also became a register of violence and pressure. The struggle between figure/ground relationships became an analogue for the battle to perceive self and ‘other’ as non-separate. The paintings hint at the fear of the fragmentation of body and mind, and of separation from our environment. There is an associated mourning for destruction of form and convention, accompanied by elation at the potential for transformation as a result of this collapse. With high viscosity and resistance to flow, an optimistic

humanist sentiment takes an anti-humanist turn; form is corrupted and perverted to appear bombastic, contrived and poisonous.

The most successful works operated between the extremes of high viscosity and low viscosity, between the coalescence and dispersal of form, where the viscosity was such that colours retained their chromatic intensity. Shapes were articulated whilst nuanced atmospheric effects came into play. The successful paintings remain open to interpretation; they sustain tentativeness and demand the interaction of a viewer. Reflective properties were used to direct the viewer to move in front of the paintings and thus to extend the instability of movement from the work to the viewer. Patches of reflection and fragmented light choreograph us to move in front of the pictures, making the viewer the very subject of distortion and suspension.

The images avoid 'closure' and resolution; they solicit interaction with the viewer in order to be completed. The paintings fix fluidity in images, yet enable plural and unfixed interpretations. The image is suspended and so is meaning. A lack of fixed definition in the work demands attention and translation, which does not serve utility. The marker of success or failure of the work is whether pictorial disequilibrium can be sustained such that the paintings continue to transform, thus avoiding stasis.

Appendix

List of Activities During Candidature

Selected Group Exhibitions

2017 *The Patterdale Project*, curated by Dr Jane Deeth, presented by the John Glover Society, Deddington, Tasmania.

2017 *A Decolonial Geographic*, curated by Fernando do Campo, Devonport Regional Art Gallery. Touring venues to be announced.

2017 *Tidal 16*, City of Devonport National Art Award, People's Choice Prize.

2016 *Fleurieu Art Prize*, Finalist, Samstag Museum of Art, Adelaide.

2014 *The Skullbone Experiment: A Paradigm of Art and Nature*, curated by Catherine and Philip Wolfhagen, Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, Launceston & UNSW Galleries, Sydney. Documentary by Roar Film, broadcast on ABC 1.

2014 *Formed and Unformed: An Exhibition of Drawing*, curated by Dr Mary Scott and David Edgar, 146 Artspace, Tasmania.

2014 *Tasmanian Landscape*, curated by Dr Malcom Bywaters, Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, Tasmania.

2014 *Investigations*, curated by Jullien Scheffer and Annie Geard, work in progress, Plimsoll Gallery.

Solo Exhibitions

2016 *The Spill*, Megan Walch, curated by Justene Williams, in *Artist to Artist*, curated by Kylie Johnson. Contemporary Art Tasmania.

2015 *Materia Prima: The Rough Guide*, Bett Gallery, Tasmania.

Residencies

2014 Tasmanian Land Conservancy, Skullbone Plains, Central Tasmania.

2014 Australia Council Overseas Studio, Tokyo, Japan. My interview with art historian Nobuo Tsuji took place in Kamakura at the commencement of this residency. (Undertaken during suspension of candidature. Although photographs and notes informed the conceptual development of the project, no work made during the residency has been submitted for assessment.)

Public Collection Acquisitions

Island Collection.

Maatsuyker Collection.

University of Tasmania.

Parliament House Collection.

Artemisia Collecting Group.

Conference Paper

“The Rough Guide.” In *Tangible Means Experiential Knowledge through Materials*, University of Southern Denmark, Design School Kolding University of Southern Denmark, 2015. *Experiential Knowledge*, Special Interest Group, Denmark. Presentation of Paper: *The Rough Guide*. Published in online proceedings 2015.

Related Activities

2015 Spiros Panigirakis, *Feedback Sessions*.

2014 *The Plimsoll Enquiry*, Fiona Lee, Plimsoll Gallery, Tasmania.

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